Family and Educator Resources:
How to Talk with Your Child When Bad Things are Happening

For Parents/Caregivers:

Excerpt from Sunnyvale School District statement: We know that witnessing these events may lead to opening up or responding to a discussion with students. The following provides guidance on how to talk with youth during a teachable moment associated with social unrest or tragedy.

Each beginning of a New Year is an opportunity to renew our promises to each other and therefore, we must move forward with resilience, strength, and hope for a bright future.

- Try to be in charge of what and how your child learns about the event. Depending upon the age of your child, it is a good idea to limit children’s exposure to traumatic news stories and images. Older children might use social media to communicate with their friends about events. It is important to monitor their interpretation of what is happening around them.
- When exposure is unavoidable, provide basic information about what happened at an age-appropriate level. Brief, basic facts are typically appropriate for younger children, while older children and teens may have more questions. Don’t overwhelm young children with too much information, but be sure to address questions as they arise.
- Do not assume that the child’s worries and questions are the same as your own. Each child will understand and react differently. This will vary to some extent with age or developmental level, personality and pre-existing anxiety, and the manner in which the information is presented.
- Use open-ended statements and questions such as “Tell me what you know” and “What questions do you have?” rather than “Do you understand what happened?” and “Do you have any questions?” This will help you get a better sense of the child’s understanding, worries, and desire for more information. Adults and children will have differing opinions about the “right” or “wrong” of events happening around them. Here are a few possible responses when children want your opinion:
  o “We need to work for peace in our community.”
  o “I want you to be safe.”
  o “What can we do in the community to make sure we all get along?”
  o “We need to make sure everyone is treated with dignity and respect.”
- Acknowledge the events in a calm way and provide reassurance about the child’s own safety and security. Be honest – don’t tell children something “could never happen” here, or to them – but minimize anxiety. Focus your ability and efforts to keep them safe from harm.
- Monitor your own emotions. Exposure to devastating news is upsetting and overwhelming for adults.

It is natural to be emotional at times. However, children look to their parents/guardians and other significant adults for a sense of whether or not things are “o.k.” Parents often serve as a child’s “barometer” regarding their own safety and security. It is important for parents to manage their own stress levels and reassure children that everything will be okay.

Additional Resources:  
NASPtalkingviolence.pdf  
How to Help your Child Cope with Tragic Events
For Teachers/Childcare Providers:

Excerpt from Sunnyvale School District: We know that as news of a crisis makes its way into your classroom, both you and your students may need support figuring out how to respond. Before you consider jumping into any discussions, be sure to take a time to breath or some other mindful exercise together. Here are a few suggestions for navigating a discussion with students as news unfolds. (Abbreviated from Teaching Tolerance)

Step 1: Listen.

Do not quiet or dismiss students who want to talk about what's happening. This is an issue of immediate importance, and it will occupy their minds whether you discuss it in class or not. Set aside the time necessary to catch them up on the news available to you, and debrief.

Let students express their feelings, share their experiences and vent. Consider letting them journal, draw or consider their reaction privately, as well. Give students time and space to react if they need it.

Step 2: Protect.

Misinformation always spreads rapidly after a crisis. Encourage a critical eye toward breaking news. If a shooting is involved, there may be fake profiles of the shooter meant to cater to stereotypes. No matter what's happened, there will likely be differing reports. Look for trustworthy sources and remain skeptical. Deal in facts and big ideas; avoid speculation. Don’t let students watch non stop, uninterrupted footage of the crisis. Do your best to make students feel safe. Be honest, but remain calm. Organize the discussion as you would any discussion: Remember class routine, classroom contracts and community agreements. Keep control, even in this moment of interruption.

And remember to be aware of students who may be managing trauma or those whose lives have been touched by violence. Keep an eye on students, monitor reactions and recognize that trauma can manifest in a variety of behaviors, including anger and disengagement.

Step 3: Model.

Help students translate feelings of hopelessness into opportunities to respond with productive action. Join them in brainstorming ways they could support survivors and families experiencing this trauma.

Step 4: Take care of yourself.

Educators bear a heavy burden in trying to protect and support their students. Check in with your own feelings. See Educator Self Care Resources

Frames for you the teacher (taken from understood.org and acknowledge alliance):

In stressful moments, it’s not always easy to find the right words to say to a student. Whether you’re frustrated, upset, or just plain busy, it can be difficult to put your own feelings aside or to find time to listen to students’ concerns.

However, responding to students with empathy in these moments is important. It’s an opportunity for you to connect with your students and build a classroom community where all students feel safe and are able to thrive.

There is no one right empathetic thing to say. Often, it’s less about what you say and more about how you listen and ask for information. Below are some empathetic sentence starters you can use for different purposes.
Yes—listen; check in with them: “how are you doing?” and ask what else, if anything, these events bring up in them or remind them of (even if they don’t seem connected, they are in the person’s mind) Get them to talk about whatever comes up.

Crying is healing. If they tear up, you can remind them that crying is a natural part of being human and is releasing some of the pain or hurt (fear, anxiety, etc.)

**Potential Phrases to use:**

- It is okay to be anxious, nervous, scared (insert emotion) about the events at the capital, what information do you need to know in order to get the full picture of what is going on?
- That is a great question I do not have the answer to, let me look into that and get back to you.

**Sentence stems to mirror/ acknowledge that you hear/ gain clarity about what they are saying:**

- It sounds to me like this might feel…
- I can sense that you are feeling [emotion]…
- I can hear how [emotion] you are feeling.
- Your face is telling me that…

**Gathering Information**

- Would/could you tell me a bit more about ________
- Can you tell me or identify what you need right now?
- Is there anything else you would like to share out?

**Clarity**

- I can hear in your voice that…
- Let me see if I have this right…
- I want to make sure I understand what you’re telling me. What I’m hearing is….
- What I hear you saying is…Is that right?

**Affirmation**

- Thank you for sharing this with me.
- I understand you feel that way.
- That sounds like an [adjective] experience.
- I hear you.
- I’m not sure what to say right now, but I’m here to listen.

You might also find this resource from teaching tolerance helpful:

**Responding to the Insurrection at the US Capital**

**Additional Resources:**