

# Psychology Today: How to Talk About School Shootings with Children

Techniques to speak about the unspeakable.

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School violence has become a disturbing norm in our daily news. Since the devastating Sandy Hook shooting, 74 more shootings have taken place. Our country's map is literally peppered with these tragedies. With the majority of the shootings taking place in schools, colleges and universities, parents are confronted with a difficult task: how do we talk about violence with our children, and help them cope after these traumatic events?

## **Talk about it.**

The first and most important piece is to talk about these tragedies. Even though it may be a difficult conversation, and you may not know exactly what to say, addressing incidences of violence with your children is crucial. While they may not be learning about new events at home, it's quite possible these events are being discussed at school or on the playground.

## **Adapt the conversation to your child.**

There is a wide spectrum of understanding and processing between young, grade school aged children and young adults in college. Therefore, it's important to adapt the conversation about violence to your child and their age group. Begin by asking your child what they know about a particular event. Allow them to lead the conversation by asking open-ended questions. Avoid interrupting them, preaching to them, or overwhelming them with superfluous information that will further complicate the issue.

## **Reassure them that they are safe.**

Despite the unfortunately frequent incidences of violence in schools, it's crucial to reassure your children that schools are safe places. Listen and validate their feelings, but also bring perspective to the situation and remind them how many people are working each and every day to keep them safe.

## **Limit television viewing of these events.**

During the periods following school violence, it's important to limit when and how much time your children spend watching the news. Some of the content covered during the news interviews may not be developmentally appropriate for your children and may cause further confusion and anxiety. If your children do watch the news, sit and watch it together so you can help them process the information as it is covered.

### **Model confidence and positivity.**

Be cognizant of your own conversations about these events in front of your children, and withhold any angry, vengeful, or fearful comments. Your children will often mirror your own reactions, and it's important to coach them through healthy, emotional processing. If you are struggling to cope yourself, take time to address your own needs so that you can be emotionally available for your children. You don't need to pretend like you have all the answers, but being confident and positive during these difficult periods will encourage your children to do the same.

### **Encourage them to complete their normal tasks.**

Maintaining a normal routine is an important part of the healing process. The recent Seattle Pacific University shooting took place right before the students' period of final exams. For those affected by this shooting, finding the emotional and psychological availability to resume their finals during this period of grieving is certainly no easy task. However, moving forward and completing their tasks, goals, and responsibilities will help the healing process.

### **Take positive action.**

It's easy for us all to feel helpless when faced with such tragedies. However, remind your child that they do make a difference and find an age-appropriate way for them to take positive action. Saying a prayer, raising money, signing a political petition, acts of kindness, or sending a card are all within the power of even the smallest child.

### **Seek professional help.**

Following a traumatic event like a school shooting, feelings of despair, depression, and flashbacks are normal occurrences. If these negative feelings and psychological patterns are not adequately addressed immediately, people can begin experience long term Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). If you notice your child is struggling with the aftereffects of violence, I encourage you to seek professional help.

Our children in this country are growing up in an unprecedented environment of school violence. There is no ideal way to handle such a tragic reality, but learning to effectively talk about these issues is an important first step in the right direction.