



Helping Children Cope When Tragedy Impacts Our Community

As our nation mourns and reacts to another school shooting, we at OUR HOUSE are struck by the ways in which similar feelings arose in response to other traumatic events. Whether it was in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, 9/11 or Hurricane Sandy, adults struggle to find the words to comfort and support their children. At a loss for the “right” words or fearing a strong reaction, adults may avoid the topic altogether. Far too often children are left alone, struggling to understand why bad and scary things happen and searching for ways to cope. The following are some suggested ways to approach the subject, address feelings, and provide a sense of safety and containment for children:

1. First, determine if your child has acquired knowledge about the traumatic event by asking “has anything happened today that you have questions or feelings about?” It’s okay for them not to know especially if they are very young.
2. Respect your child’s need to know and assess their level of exposure to the facts. Be prepared to add information if the child wants to know details. Answer in an age-appropriate and honest way.
3. Provide a safe environment for your child to express their concerns and feelings. Let them know that all of their feelings are ok.
4. Address your child’s fears for their own safety by offering reassurance that their school is a safe place and that they are loved and cared for there.
5. Limit exposure to news coverage and adult conversations about the traumatic event as much as possible. Turn off the television and monitor internet usage.
6. Decrease night-time anxieties by preparing your child for bedtime by turning off television and computers and engaging in soothing activities such as listening to soft music, warm baths and for young children, reading bedtime stories.
7. Seek professional help if your child exhibits extreme changes in their sleeping, eating, mood or if you are concerned about the way your child is behaving.
8. Model healthy ways to cope including talking to someone you trust, exercising, eating healthy foods and knowing that all feelings are ok.
9. Understand that while we cannot always explain when bad or scary things happen, we must resist the urge to blame the innocent.
10. Honor the memory of those who died and decrease feelings of helplessness by making a card or sending a donation to the families affected by the tragedy.

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