



Helping Children Cope When Tragedy Impacts Our Nation

As our nation mourns and reacts to the Robb Elementary massacre, OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center recognizes the many feelings evoked by this and previous traumatic events. Whether it was in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, the Buffalo, NY grocery store shooting, or the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, 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. Children are often left alone struggling to understand why bad and scary things happen, searching for ways to cope. Providing your child with truthful and age-appropriate information signals to them that you are available to talk about the traumatic event and that they can trust you with their thoughts and feelings.

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?” Alternatively, “Did they talk at school today about anything that happened in our country that upset you?” If so, respond in a truthful way. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings about the traumatic event with you. It is not realistic to think that you can shield your school-aged children from the truth. It is always better for children to hear about difficult information from the people they trust. Assess their level of exposure to the facts. Be prepared to add truthful information if the child wants to know details. Answer in an age-appropriate and honest way. For example: “A bad person hurt people at a club.” Then follow up by saying “do you have any questions?” Add pertinent information in direct response to their questions.
2. Provide a safe environment for your child to express their concerns and feelings. Let them know that all of their feelings are ok. Each family member will respond in their own unique way. Model an expression of your own feelings but assure them that you can handle your own feelings and are there to support them.
3. Address your child’s fears for their own safety by offering reassurance that these types of events are very rare. Most schools are very safe places, and they are loved and cared for at their own school. Develop a safety plan for your family, including the names of those people who would care for your children if you were unable to care for them, and share that information.
4. Limit your child’s exposure to news coverage and adult conversations about the traumatic event as much as possible. Turn off the television and monitor internet usage. Similarly, limit your own exposure to minimize the trauma that can accompany overexposure to negative events. Seek support for yourself from other adults.

5. Decrease night-time anxieties by preparing your child for bedtime. Turn off television and computers and engaging in soothing activities such as listening to soft music, taking warm baths, and for young children, reading bedtime stories.
6. Seek professional help if your child exhibits extreme changes in their sleeping, eating, or mood, or if you are concerned about the way your child is behaving.
7. Model healthy ways to cope including talking to someone you trust, exercising, eating healthy foods, and knowing that all feelings are okay.
8. 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.

For more information, visit www.OurHouse-Grief.org or call (888)417-1444