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School Shootings and Community Gun Violence: What to Say to Children and How to Help Them Cope

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School shootings and gun violence have become a horrible reality in our country. The latest in Uvalde, Texas is another example of these tragic events that fill our screens with updates and our hearts with grief. Mass shootings are distressing, but school shootings may be especially difficult for children.

Reports of shootings in perceived safe places such as schools, supermarkets, and places of worship can trigger anxiety and stress for children. Even participating in active shooter drills that are meant to prepare them for such incidents can be equally upsetting. Fortunately, there are ways that parents and caregivers can help children cope with the trauma of gun violence.

How parents can help children after a school shooting

Get the facts

Before talking with your child, be sure you have all the available facts about the situation so you can speak honestly and respond to questions that may arise during the conversation.

Sort out your own feelings first

Tragic events can be incredibly stressful. Before having a conversation with your child, it's important to understand how you are feeling. Children can sense when adults are nervous or anxious. It's okay for you to let your child know how you are feeling. It shows that you are caring, and that it's appropriate for your child to express their feelings as well.

Plan the conversation

You want to be prepared when you talk to your child. Take some time to plan what you want to say and find a quiet time for the discussion. Consider writing it down in advance, or practice in a mirror first. The better prepared you are, the easier the conversation will be. Communicating calmly and with confidence will go a long way toward reassuring your child that they are safe.

Ask the child questions

It's important that you understand what your child knows about a tragic event. Your child may have received information through television, social media, or friends at school, but unfortunately, that information may not be factual. Provide age-appropriate details and take your cues from your child concerning how much information to share. Once you've established what happened, you can ask about feelings.

It's vital to explore how your child is feeling so you can address it appropriately. The Rhode Island Let It Out Campaign encourages kids to talk about their feelings with trusted adults and provides help and support for adults to prepare for these challenging conversations.

Allow your child to ask questions – and provide honest answers

Give your child an opportunity to ask questions about the event. Be truthful and answer honestly. Make your responses appropriate for your child's age. If you don't know the answer to a question, it's okay to respond to your child with "I don't know." Remember, children are all unique in the way they process the world.

Provide reassurance

One of the most important roles for parents and caregivers is to provide a sense of safety for your child. Following a shooting, a child may no longer feel safe. Let your child know you will do everything in your power to keep them safe and secure. Remind them there are others who are working to keep them safe as well, including police, school resource officers, teachers, clergy, etc. Also, encourage your child to come to you with questions or concerns. This will help to reestablish a sense of security for your child.

Take care of yourself

Tragic events of all kinds can be upsetting. It's important for adults to practice self-care so we can be there to support children. Be sure you take the time with your trusted support system and make self-care and stress management a priority.

Get help

If your child continues to exhibit signs of stress and anxiety, your primary care pediatrician and the team at Bradley Hospital can help.

Kids' Link RI connects parents and caregivers to an experienced clinician that can help them access children's services in Rhode Island and determine the best place to go for treatment and counseling. To contact Kids' Link RI, call 1-855-543-5465.