

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Teachers and Parents

Specifically created for talking about the school shooting in Texas

The tragic school shooting in Texas can be confusing and distressing for children and can lead to many questions. Children may fear for themselves, their family, and their friends. Social support, most critically, the significant adults in a child's life, can build resilience, reduce fear, and create a way to understand a senseless act. Children will look to the adults for guidance on how to react. Teachers and parents can build their sense of safety by reviewing routines, establishing a sense of normalcy, and speaking with children about their thoughts and fears. Providing space to have a conversation is important. It is not necessary to have 'answers' or explanations but to provide children the opportunity to voice what they are thinking and feeling and correct any misinformation.

Guiding principles to support children with current events related to recent school tragedy in Texas

- Adults can expect that with the recent media coverage of the school shooting in Texas, children of all ages will have questions and/or concerns and will reach out to adults, both teachers and parents, to help them make sense of the issue.
- It is important to recognize that children have likely been exposed to information already regarding this tragedy.
- Caregivers should be mindful of supervising children when they are on social media so that caregivers can answer questions and help children make sense of the issue.

Prepare yourself:

- Take stock of your own emotions to ensure you are mentally and emotionally able to engage in a difficult conversation with a child. Before beginning or throughout the conversation, pausing to take a deep breath can assist with keeping oneself grounded and able to listen to what the child is saying.
- Having the ability to engage in these conversations is important and requires the ability to listen, provide information, and engage in honest dialogue with children.
- Ensure you are grounded and mentally ready for children to ask difficult or hard-hitting questions.
- Recognize children may have questions and adults need to answer these questions honestly. It is when children can engage in thoughtful conversations with a caring adult that they are able to build resilience for themselves and compassion for others.
- When a question seems too difficult to know how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This often reveals what is behind the question, which is easier to answer. For example, if a child asks, "Why would someone want to kill children?", bounce the question back to them. "Can you tell me what *you* know about the situation?" and/or "Why do you think a person might engage in such a hurtful act?"

Before you talk to children:

- Young children pick up on emotions and body language more than they pay attention to words.
- Language and information need to match the capacity of children.
- Be curious: explore with the child- what facts do they understand relevant to the situation?
- Set the context – For example: *For example:* "We are going to take some time to discuss a sensitive issue that occurred in an elementary school in Texas yesterday. You may have heard a

lot of things from your friends, on social media or the news. It is important that we talk about these things to ensure you have the facts and can understand the issues without having to rely on rumors or misinformation. It might also be that there are elements we do not have answers for and may never fully understand.”

Keep explanations developmentally appropriate:

At all levels, use words and not images and in any discussion, take your cues from the child(ren), who will reveal how much they are seeing, hearing, and understanding. While there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the *possibility* of something happening and the *probability* that it will affect you (our school community).

- **Early elementary school:**
 - With young children, messages should be short and clear. Keep information brief and simple.
 - Engage students in a discussion about all the things that are done at school and home already, to ensure safety. If students remain worried, ask them how they can build upon these practices, for example, looking for the adult supervisors on the playground when outside, checking that doors are locked before they go to bed, etc.
- **Middle school:**
 - Expect students to somewhat challenge whether they are truly safe at school. Review safety procedures and ask how these procedures add to safety. Expect there may be some intermixing of imagination and reality that will need to be pulled apart using logic and engaging students in a thinking (vs. lecture) process.
- **High school:**
 - Expect students to have strong opinions about society, causes of violence, and justice.
 - Engage students discussing how they engage in safety practices at school, home and when out socially. Allow students to share examples of how schools might improve safety practices, especially related to how to prevent tragedies.
 - When speaking with older children, they are likely to be more in tune with adult conversations as they are exposed to social media and their friends and classmates may be talking about what is happening.

Conclusion of discussion:

- Discussion with young people needs to end with them having some action they can take to reduce any sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Encouraging students to feel a sense of agency empowers them to feel hopeful and able to make a difference.
- As this is an evolving situation and there will be continuous coverage in the news, adults should expect that children will have more questions as new factors and information emerge and as children process the information from any discussion held. This is normal and does not mean that children are not coping. This demonstrates they are seeking understanding and are curious about the questions and answers.
- Examples of actions may be as simple as agreeing to have more discussions as the days move along, reviewing all the actions taken at school or home to ensure safety (attendance, locking doors, etc.,) reviewing how paying attention adds to safety, noticing anything usual, etc.