

Talking with Children About Tragedy

Images from tragedies and acts of violence saturate our televisions, radios and conversations, calling to mind other dark days. When this kind of violence happens, it is important to talk with our children, but it is often difficult to know what to say. Here are some suggestions that may help...

First and foremost, children need to be reassured that they are safe. Children often experience anxiety, fear and a personal sense of risk. Limit TV viewing for younger children, especially those of preschool age. It is very difficult for young children to process images and messages in news reports. Let children know that tragic events are not our everyday experience and that the adults who love them will always try to take care of them. (i.e. “I know you are scared. I am too. It is a scary thing that happened, but I love you and I will always do my very best to make sure that you are safe.”)

Just like adults, children will have varied reactions. They may ask lots of questions, cling to parents or exhibit behavior of younger children, have stomachaches or headaches, or may have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Older children and adolescents may make inappropriate jokes or glib comments or direct their anger and frustration at other seemingly unconnected situations. All of these are various ways of dealing with tragedy. Expect and give permission for a wide range of reactions. It is important to validate your child’s feelings and not try to explain to them why they should feel another way. Many children will need more physical affection and one-on-one time with parents.

The best plan for discussion is to talk honestly, but without a lot of graphic detail. Be gently concrete and truthful when answering questions. Be careful of using euphemisms for death such as people “passed” or “went to sleep” or “went away”. These may send scary messages to younger children who wonder if they might go to sleep and not wake up or if their parents will go away forever.

Be aware of where your child is developmentally. Preschool children may see death as reversible, temporary or impersonal. Children between ages 5-9 are beginning to realize that death is permanent but may still think they could escape through their own ingenuity or efforts. From age 9 or 10 through adolescence, children begin comprehending fully that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they too will die someday.

Reinforce your family’s values. This is a good time to talk about your family belief’s regarding the sanctity of life or helping others. Reiterate your position as a person of faith and don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know why this happened” or “I just don’t know how to answer that.” Also be aware that some religious explanations that may comfort adults may unsettle a child. For example saying, “It must have been God’s will” or “Those people are with God now” might be frightening to a child who may

worry that God could decide to come get them. Assure them that God loves us and is present as we struggle to understand.

If they don't want to talk, give them other options. If your child doesn't want to talk much about the incidents and you suspect they may be worrying about things they can't articulate, you might ask them to draw pictures or talk about what feelings they think *other* people might be having. This gives the child an opportunity to gain some distance to what they themselves are feeling. If your child doesn't want to talk about the events at all, they may not need to talk and you might just take a walk with them or read them a book or give them a hug to let them know you care about them and how they are feeling.

Remind your children of safety procedures. Talk about measures that are already in place, such as police, firefighters, authorities and policies at school for dealing with danger, etc. Talk with them about safety plans that might make them feel more comfortable. Keep talking with them even after media coverage subsides.

Keep your schedule normal. In as much as it is possible, try to continue with family routines such as dinnertime or bedtime rituals. Children (and adults) can often find some comfort by connecting with some sense of normalcy, even in the midst of chaos and fear.

Find a way to participate in rebuilding or reconciliation. Times of tragedy bring out both the worst in people and the best in people. Help your children by making a conscious choice to take part in caring for others and helping where you can. Get involved in a neighborhood watch or a community campaign. Doing something concrete helps us feel like we are part of the solution and it is a definitive statement of hope and rebirth.

When we respond to tragedy, our feelings may be intense and varied. Give your children and yourself some time to adjust. There are no "magic words", no "right answer" –just be with your children and talk with them. Remember there are people available to help you –your school counselors, as well as community agencies and professional counselors who are specially trained to deal with situations like this; and there are many resource people in the church who can be of tremendous help and comfort in time of tragedy.

Additional Suggestions

Consider spending some family time praying for the people who have been hurt or have died. Talk to God about not understanding why this happened. Pray for teachers, students and employees at the school, as well as the people who live in the area and people everywhere who lost someone they loved.

Read prayers together from the Book of Common Prayer or other books. (One suggestion is to look through the services for burial, pages 462-507, or read collects such as For Social Justice on p. 260 or the Prayer attributed to St. Francis on p. 833 or the Prayer for the Human Family or for Peace on p.815 or for Schools and Colleges on p. 824)/

Read scripture together. Especially appropriate are Psalms 23, 34:18, 46:1, and 121. John 14:27, Romans 8:34-35, 37-39, 2 Timothy 1:7, Revelation 21:2-7.

Don't hesitate to contact members of the clergy or educational staff at your church if you want further suggestions or just want to talk.