

Talking to children when something scary or traumatic happens to others

If a traumatic, scary event takes place, even miles away or far on the other side of the world, today's technology and media can bring it right into a child's home, and, in graphic detail. For some children, this can be extremely distressing. They may react in a wide range of ways to the anxiety, fears or distress the event may cause them. Every child is different.

Most children's key concern usually is: Will this happen to me - or to people that I know and care about? This question lets you know what they need the most - a sense of safety and reassurance.

Here are 20 helpful tips about talking to your child when a terrible event has happened.

- 1. Remind yourself that your goal is to increase their sense of safety and security.**
Remember it's not so much about what you say, but how you make them feel.
- 2. Listen to your child to learn how they think or feel about what's happened.** Watch their behaviour and their play. Check in with them, ask them what they know. Gently correct any mistaken ideas about the event. Encourage questions and answer them. Let them lead the direction of the conversation if possible. If you're asked why something happened, it's okay to say if you don't know why.
- 3. Use language that suits their age and stage.**
- 4. Keep it simple and honest.**
- 5. Keep calm and patient.** Some children need to keep asking the same questions as they try to figure out what's happened.
- 6. Be straight forward when you describe the event.** For example, "A hurt a lot of people, very badly. He was very sick in his mind and got confused and mixed up. What he did isn't a normal thing to happen. It's very, very sad. Isn't it good that you have people who can look after you and keep you safe?"
- 7. Reassure them that feeling upset when something like this happens is okay and lots of other people will be feeling upset about it too.**
- 8. Be careful what you let them see or hear through the media.** Limit this. Switch off the TV or radio or internet, or put away the newspaper. Repeated images or sound or stories can intensify this event for them unnecessarily or even traumatise them.
- 9. It's okay to grieve, to cry and express sadness when there's been a loss.** Grief is part of life - it's normal - so sharing such times together is completely okay.

The right help at the right time in the right way

- 10. Help them to see that when something scary or awful has happened, we can always see people who are helping.** E.g. emergency services, local community people, friends and family, schools, doctors and nurses, and so on. This can be reassuring and helps to balance out the picture they have in their mind about the event.
- 11. Keep up routines and make extra time to spend with them.** Extra hugs, reassuring smiles and eye contact are important. Bed time is often when good talks can happen.
- 12. Your child will pick up on all your reactions.** What sort of atmosphere are you creating? A very over stressed, very afraid parent won't be able to give their child reassuring, calm support. Look after yourself. It might help to find another adult to talk to about your own reactions to the event.
- 13. Watch out for a wide range of reactions.** Every child is different. Reactions can be physical, emotional, mental, behavioural or spiritual. Some children may become especially tuned in, anxious or sad about what happened. Others won't at all.
- 14. If your child is extremely anxious, ask them what might help them to feel safer.** Often it can be a very simple thing.
- 15. Look out for those children who are especially vulnerable.** This event might trigger reactions in them that relate back to things they've been traumatised by before. They will need extra attention and reassurance, or perhaps some professional help from your doctor, or a psychologist or counsellor.
- 16. Do something positive.** As a family do something positive that reminds you all that life has good possibilities in it too. Do something that helps others or have some fun times being together. This can help them to get a sense of balance as they learn about the world – especially if it's feeling less safe than it was before. It can also help them release some of their distress constructively.
- 17. Talk about what's most important to you, as a family.** The time after a traumatic event can be a time when some things become very clear. For example, who matters to you the most, what you're grateful for, what is and isn't okay in the world, and so on. Talk about these things together, in age appropriate ways.
- 18. If the event involved violence, talk honestly about why criminal violence is not okay.** If guns have been used, talk openly about what real guns can do and why they are very dangerous.
- 19. Realise that sometimes a child's reactions can arrive a long time after an event has happened.** Questions may pop up weeks, months or even years later. This lets you know that your child has been processing the event in their own time, bit by bit, but that it's troubling them. Whenever the questions or reactions come, support your child.
- 20. Visit the Skylight Resilience Hub at www.skylight.org.nz for more support.**

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