

Talking to Your Child About School Violence



CIGNA Behavioral Health

As parents, it's only natural for us to worry about our children. We try our best to help them over life's hurdles, and to protect them from the dangers of the world. When the time comes to send them off to school, we trust that we are leaving them in safe and capable hands. However, certain events are out of our control. Occasionally, that rare act of school violence is committed that shatters the world as we know it.

While school violence can include anything from bullying to damaging property on school grounds, school shootings tend to get the most attention due their horrific nature, and the injuries and fatalities they can cause. After an event such as a school shooting happens, emotional images and stories of terror quickly take over the media, filling our minds with tales of the event. Not even our children escape this exposure.

After an instance of school violence occurs, children experience various reactions. While some children aren't affected at all, others live in fear that a similar situation will happen to them. This fear can become so intense that it significantly impacts their behavior and performance.

Following a traumatic event such as a school shooting, it's important to talk to your child about any feelings they are experiencing. Below are some tips on how to open up the lines of communication with your child.

Tips for Talking to Your Children

- **Encourage open and honest communication.** Let your child know that you are available for them to talk to. Listen to your child and keep in mind that although their fears may seem unfounded to you, they are very real for them. Make sure that your child knows they can approach you or other trusted adults, such as a teacher, should they feel anxious or that their safety is threatened.
- **Answer your child's questions honestly.** Be straightforward with your answers, and base them on your child's age and ability to understand. Don't lie to your child by telling them that it's not a possibility that something like this can happen in their community. Instead, let them know it's not common for things like this to happen – this is the reason why certain events receive such a large amount of media attention. Keep in mind that your child may need to hear your answers repeatedly in order to feel somewhat reassured.
- **Reassure your child** of their safety. However, make sure to be realistic and truthful. Let them know that people in their community (for example, parents, police officials, and teachers) are taking steps to ensure their safety.
- **Reestablish a routine** as quickly as possible if your child's normal routine has been disrupted, it will help them to feel more secure. Keeping your child home from school to in attempt to reduce anxiety will only increase fear when it's time to return.
- **Provide physical comfort.** Being close to your child can help to restore a sense of safety and security.

- **Help your child identify and express feelings** at their own pace. Invite them to talk by asking questions such as “Do you feel safe at your school?”, but don’t force them to talk about it if they aren’t ready or if they aren’t interested.
- **Share your feelings** with your child as appropriate. Let them know that it’s normal to be worried, scared, or sad.
- **Limit your child’s exposure to the media.** Young children do not understand that replays of news events are not happening at the moment. As a result, they often respond as if the event were happening all over again each time they are exposed to it.

Be Aware of the Warning Signs

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are not as successful at helping our children as we may like. If your child seems to be severely affected, or is struggling to deal with their feelings, contact a mental health professional. Following are some signs that your child might be struggling to deal with an issue.

- Overly emotional reactions (such as crying, moodiness, and irritability)
- Physical complaints (such as stomachaches or headaches)
- Appetite changes
- Difficulty getting along with others
- Not wanting to go to school
- Poor performance in school
- Behavioral problems
- Increased or new fears (such as a fear for their own safety)
- Sleep disruptions; nightmares
- Excessive clinginess
- Withdrawal from family or friends

We cannot control all of the events that will occur in children’s lives. However, we can provide our children with the tools necessary to successfully cope when tragedy strikes. By doing so, we can minimize their fears, increase their confidence, and prepare them for whatever challenges life brings them.

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