Talking to Children About Shooting Incidents

After a shooting incident, children may worry that they or their family will become victims of violence. They may have questions about the nature of violence or why people commit seemingly senseless acts. Often, they will look to the adults in their lives for answers.

When a child asks these questions, it is best to be honest about the reality of violence in the world and the fact that unexpected things can sometimes happen. However, it’s also important to create a sense of safety and calm the child’s fears. Simple reassurances work best for young children, while adolescents and teens may need more realistic facts about the risks of gun violence and tips for being safe while in a public place.

When talking to children, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- It is best to wait for your child to ask you about a violent incident. Avoid bringing it up first unless your child appears visibly distressed or her or his behavior has changed for the worse.
- Before speaking with your child, make sure your own emotions are under control. If you are visibly frightened, your child will feel anxious too. Focus on helping your child and “role model” appropriate behavior.
- Avoid giving details about the incident. Do not let young children see media reports or images, and set limits on access for older children.
- Encourage your child to express her or his feelings. Don’t be too quick to jump in and try to “make it all better.” Your job is to listen.
- Be ready for the “why?” question. Provide a simple, honest answer, such as “Sometimes people do bad things for reasons we don’t understand.” Make it clear that most people do not behave violently and that the perpetrator of the incident was not acting in an acceptable way.
- Avoid offering false reassurance to your child or saying things like “Nothing like this will ever happen to you.” Instead, use phrases like “I will do everything I can to protect you and keep you safe.”

Put tragic events in perspective. Explain that while the incident was tragic and upsetting, it only affected a small handful of people in a specific place.

When children are anxious or afraid, it is not unusual for them to exhibit behavior issues, such as:

- Disruptions in sleep or eating patterns
- Nightmares
- Declining school performance
- “Clingy” behavior or fear of leaving home
- Disobedience or aggressiveness
- Headaches or stomach problems
- Difficulty concentrating

If your child shows ongoing signs of fear and anxiety, consider seeking professional assistance.

LifeMatters has professional counselors available 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Call or visit mylifematters.com.

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