

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT TRAGEDY

In this age of instant information, whenever a tragedy occurs, the news is broadcast throughout the world within minutes. Whether it is school shootings, local violence, natural disasters or other tragic events, frightening images permeate our televisions, radios and conversations. When these things happen, it may bring to mind other tragedies we have witnessed and it is important to be ready to talk with our children, but it is often difficult to know what to say. Following 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 television 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. (ie – “I know you are scared. I am too. It’s 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 to what they hear.** They may ask lots of questions, cling to parents or exhibit the 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 and may 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 the 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 what your family believes about the sanctity of life and 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, “God has a plan” or “Those people are with God now” could be frightening rather than reassuring to the young child who may worry that God might decide to come get them. Assure them that God loves us all and is present with each of us 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 may want to 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 really may just not need to talk right now, but you can take a walk with them or read them a book or give them a hug to let them know you care.
- ✘ **Remind children of safety procedures.** Talk about measures that are already in place, such as police, fireman, 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 the 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. Have a family bake sale or yard sale and contribute all money to an agency that is trying to help. Help your children write letters to other children who were affected. Donate clothes, toys, food, etc. to rebuilding efforts. Doing something concrete helps us feel like we are part of the solution and it 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 that 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 priests, ministers and lay people who can be of tremendous help and comfort in a 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 the students, teachers, and employees at the school, as well as the people who live in the area.
- ✘ 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 Doctors and Nurses, p. 460 or the Prayer attributed to St. Francis on p. 833 or the Prayer for the Human Family on p. 815.)
- ✘ Read scripture together (Especially appropriate are Psalm 23, Romans 8:34-35, 37-39, Psalm 121, 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.

TALKING WITH TEENS ABOUT TRAGEDY

Much of what has been written about talking with children can pertain to talking with teenagers as well, but some additional suggestions follow:

- ✘ **Teen reactions may be more intense.** Teenagers are already living with emotional ups-and-downs and a tragic event may exacerbate the situation. Watch for displaced anger/aggression and be aware that routine disagreements can quickly escalate while teens are processing their feelings. Try to be gentle with your teen and consider letting some of the non-essentials “slide” for a few days. Tell them you love them – even if you aren’t sure they want to hear it.
- ✘ **Reassure your teens that the world is not total chaos.** Many teens will have increased anger and cynicism about people in general, especially when they hear stories of cruelty brutality. Pointing out all the ways people have honored the victims and tried to help their families may help balance out some of the anger teens feel about the world in general.
- ✘ **Teens may be fascinated with graphic details.** Teens inundated with media images may be mesmerized by gory news reports, etc. This is one way of dealing with their feelings. They may be overly interested in body counts, stories of how and where people died, etc.
- ✘ **Teens are in a different developmental stage.** Teenagers understand death is inevitable, universal and irreversible, but may still feel as if “this could never happen to me”. Teens are more likely to ask big questions about the way life works or the nature of God’s character. They may need adult guidance for processing grief or developing appropriate coping skills, but don’t be surprised if they first turn to their friends. Teens are not sure how to handle emotions, either public or private, and may process things as they talk with trusted friends.
- ✘ **Talk about how we treat others.** It is important to discuss some of the complex social forces that can lead to violence. Talk honestly about the social pressures prevalent in teens’ lives... about what it feels like to be left out or ostracized; about how we deal with alienation and how we manage our anger. While most situations, won’t lead to violence, it is important to acknowledge the frustration and pain that teenagers feel when they don’t fit in.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- ✘ Brainstorm ways for your teen to help. Finding concrete tasks may help your teenager regain their sense of personal power and security. Writing consolation cards, working to make schools and communities safer, advocating for gun control, or just vowing not to contribute to violence in any way – all these may help your teen regain equilibrium. Check out the National Crime Prevention Council for great teen programs: www.ncpc.org/programs/tcc/
- ✘ Besides reading the scriptures or prayers listed above, the Journey to Adulthood (J2A) program offers a wonderful lesson plan called “*What I know, what I don’t know, and what I believe.*” This is a great way to process what has happened, to give voice to all that we don’t understand or control and to reaffirm our basic beliefs.
- ✘ Another good option for teens is to read through The Great Litany (p. 148 BCP). Many congregations use this litany in Lent, but the words offer some haunting and comforting words that may help to express some of our feelings about recent events... VERY powerful!