

# NewYork-Presbyterian Youth Anxiety Center Guide for Parents' Response to School Violence



## Addressing Tragedies with Children

The NewYork-Presbyterian Youth Anxiety Center, and the Departments of Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medicine and Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons are deeply saddened by the immense pain and loss of life in Uvalde Texas, Buffalo New York, and other communities around the United States in the wake of recent mass shootings. As health care providers, educators, researchers, and people, we are committed to supporting youth and families who are stressed, vulnerable, sad and afraid.

We know that countless parents and caregivers are having seemingly impossible conversations with their children about violence in our schools and communities. It can be incredibly important and healthy to discuss this with children in a way that is understandable for their age. However, we also know that doing so can understandably bring up many difficult emotions, questions, and concerns for both parents and kids. Below is a brief guide for parents to help families cope with the aftermath of these tragedies. We have included information on how youth respond to stress and tragedy, tips for talking with kids about what has happened, and ways to take meaningful action. While this resource does not offer solutions and could never erase the pain and fear many families are experiencing, we aim to provide helpful information and guidance for all those who are struggling. Links to additional resources are included below.

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## A Child's Response to Tragedy

It is common for children to react to scary news with shifts in their mood and behavior. These changes are often short-term and an understandable reaction to a serious event.

Younger children (ages 3 to 8 years) may not learn of or understand what happened in the larger sense, but will pick up on the fear, anger, sadness, and other reactions of the people around them (for example, parents, teachers, peers). Consequently, these young children may seem more sad, worried, irritable, "clingy" and wanting more affection, or appear more withdrawn. Young children may experience nightmares in the immediate aftermath of the event and be more upset when separating from you. Some children may also experience changes in behavior, such as an increase in activity level, difficulty focusing in school, difficulty sitting still, less interest in usual activities including playing with friends, and physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches.

In older kids and teens, you may find they seem sadder and more worried, too. Whether they hear of these events from peers, the media, or from discussions at home, youth in the later primary school grades through to high school and college age could be frightened about a similar event happening to them and to their school or community. They may become avoidant of wanting to do their usual activities, more irritable and/or anxious, have difficulty focusing on schoolwork, and develop problems with sleep. Some kids may have many questions and want to talk about the event, while others may avoid discussing it at all. It is also normal for kids to feel nervous about going back to school and ask to stay home.

What is important across the ages of youth, is that they may be hearing or viewing things related to these events and left to themselves, their imaginations can run to situations that are even more frightening and confusing for them. It is important to ask your child what they have heard, validate their feelings, and to let your child know that it's normal to have a lot of different feelings and reactions after a frightening event.

If these emotional and behavioral changes in your child continue and seem to worsen, it may be wise to seek support from a professional, such as a school counselor or a therapist. These signs include prolonged sadness and worry, worsening anxiety about separating from caregivers, catastrophic thinking ("It isn't safe anywhere!"), a fixation on details and questions about the event, avoiding school, or withdrawing from activities they usually enjoy.



## Tips for Talking with Your Child

### **Be aware of your tone of voice and try to be calm and warm yet matter of fact.**

*Tip: Take a minute to think about what you will say. Do your best to speak calmly. Rehearse in your mind sticking to what you know is being done to keep your child safe and if asked, to tell what you know is being done to help the families who are directly affected by these tragedies. Take a deep breath every few sentences. Take a break and come back to the conversation if you're feeling overwhelmed.*

### **Let them know you are interested in how they are feeling without them having to bring it up.**

*Example: There have been some scary things on the news. How are you feeling?*

### **Focus on facts: what, when, where, who was affected and not affected. Describe what is known and not yet known.**

*Example: I want to tell you about something that happened yesterday that you might hear about. Somebody in [location] brought a gun to a school and some kids and teachers were killed. Most of the students and adults were able to get out safely. We don't know why this happened yet. Most schools are very safe, but bad things like this do happen sometimes, and I wanted you to know in case people are talking about it at school today.*



### **Name, normalize and validate emotions, model appropriate expression of coping and emotions**

*Example: It sounds to me like you're feeling sad and scared. That makes sense because this was a really awful thing that happened. Lots of people feel the same way as you do, and it can be helpful to talk about it.*

*Example: It is really hard to hear about these things. I am going to go for a walk to help me feel a little better- would you like to come with me, or do you have other ideas of what might help?*

### **Be aware of all the ways children might be learning about the events**

*Example: I saw some information on TV and online. Have you seen anything on your phone or heard anything from friends?*

*Tip: Be prepared to talk about any graphic details or images they may have seen or heard about, and to clear up any misunderstandings or misinformation that came from an unreliable source.*

### **Welcome all questions and know that it is okay not to have all the answers.**

*Example: I know this may be scary or confusing. What questions do you have? If you don't have any now, you can always ask me later.*

*Example: That's a really good question. I don't have an answer right now, but I will think about it more and answer when I can.*

*Tip: Ask for support from other parents, school staff, and/or family for answers to their questions and appropriate language*

### **Respect your child's wish to not talk much**

*Example: It's okay if you don't want to talk right now. You can come to me anytime you want.*

### **Convey confidence without promising nothing bad will ever happen**

*Example: We will do everything we can to keep you safe.*

## Actions Parents Can Take

**Monitor your child's intake of information about the topic:** Consider taking a break from the news, limit your child's social media use, and use age-appropriate language if there is a chance your kids might overhear conversations you have with other adults.

**Learn about community support:** find out what your child's school and other communities are doing in response to the tragedy. Connecting with your child's teachers, school counselors, and trusted mentors can help foster support across settings.

**Find ways to contribute as a family:** connect with community groups proactively responding to the situation and/or advocating for change

**Engage in self-care:** taking care of yourself is an essential part of helping to care for your child. Model healthy coping (exercise, social connection, distraction). Remember that our children take their cues from us.

**Keep your regular schedule:** it can be frightening and difficult to return to a normal schedule after a tragedy and sticking to your child's routine can help foster a sense of safety



## For additional information and resources:

### American Academy of Pediatrics

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/talking-to-children-about-tragedies-and-other-news-events.aspx>

### American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime/shooting-aftermath>

### American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Resource\\_Libraries/Resource\\_Library\\_on\\_Guns.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Libraries/Resource_Library_on_Guns.aspx)

### National Academy of School Psychologists

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/talking-to-children-about-violence-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>

### Center for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/copingwith-stresstips.html>

### The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-guidelines-helping-youth-after-recent-shooting>

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