

# Talking with Younger Children About Violence at School

After violence or the threat of violence at school children can experience a wide range of reactions. Most children experience some reaction and ultimately recover from the trauma. Talking to your child about these reactions and associated safety issues can be difficult.

**Manage your own reactions:** It's okay, and expected, that you are going to have reactions to these events. It's also okay to let your child see your range of reactions. They'll be watching and taking their cues from you. While it's okay to let children know that you are worried or upset, also demonstrate how you can stay calm and explain what helps you to feel safe. If you are experiencing reactions, try processing them with another adult before sharing them with your child.

**How to start the conversation with your child:** It can be hard to know how to have this conversation with your child. We want to try to understand what they experienced during the event and how they are feeling. Here are some suggestions:

- **Ask your child what they know about the event. Try to get a sense of what they understand and how they feel about it. Try asking >**

- What do you know about what happened in school today?
- What did adults tell you about the lockdown today?

- **Ask your child how they felt during the event. Try to get a sense of their feelings and reactions, too. Try asking >**

- How did you feel during the school lockdown?
- When this was happening, how did it feel in your body?

**Helpful Tip:** The easiest way to have this conversation with your child might be while they are engaged in an activity: drawing, sitting on a swing, or driving with you in the car.

- **Listen to your child. It may be hard to hear their reactions to the event. Using active listening strategies will help you support them. Let them tell you in their own words so you can understand what they know and how they are feeling. Recognize and thank them when they share with you. Try saying >**

- It sounds like you felt really scared during the lockdown.
- It makes sense that your body felt tense and your stomach hurt.
- Thank you for sharing how you felt – that was really brave.

**Helpful Tip:** Try not to assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. Instead, listen for understanding. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. It may be hard to hear about your child's experience, allow them space to share authentically and avoid trying to correct or "fix" their story.

## Children's Reactions to Trauma:

### EMOTIONS

- Anxiety, fear, worry
- Irritation and anger
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Feeling responsible or numb

### THOUGHTS

- Difficulty concentrating
- Challenges with school work
- Afraid of others' perceptions
- Safety concerns for self, others

### PHYSICAL

- Unexplained body aches, like stomachaches or headaches
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty eating

### BEHAVIORS

- Withdrawal or isolation
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty regulating behavior

**How to answer your child's questions:** You know your child best. Try to be as truthful as possible, while recognizing that different children can handle different amounts of information based on their age and development.

**Helpful Tip:** Be honest about what you do not know: so often after violence or threats of violence, we do not know all of the answers. Be honest with your child when you do not know an answer to their question. Although it may be tempting to speculate or fill in missing details, this can spread rumors- avoid making up information you do not know. If you hear your child talk about rumors or inaccurate information, take the time to gently correct them

● **Throughout the conversation, focus on safety. As you talk with your child, acknowledge concerns they may have about their safety. Offer reassurance that many people are addressing the violence, helping people who are impacted, and working to keep us safe. It may also be helpful to reference resources or protocols at their schools and communities. Try saying >**

- It sounds like you felt very unsafe today at school.
- Was there anything at school today that DID make you feel safe?
- Are there things we can do to make you feel safe now?

## In the Days and Weeks to Follow

**Monitor and Consider Limiting Media Access:** Limit media viewing and repeated exposure to distressing images, particularly for younger children. It is important to model healthy media consumption. Children may be aware of what we are scrolling through and watching related to the event.

**Maintain Routines:** Sticking to a daily structure helps us feel safe and in control. Help children of all ages maintain their daily routines, while knowing that some flexibility may be needed during this time.

**Keep the Door Open:** Encourage children to come to you with questions or concerns anytime. Let them know that their fears and questions are typical and you will always make time for them. At the same time, don't just wait for them to approach you – you need to strike a balance between constantly "checking in on them" and letting them return to their normal routines.

**Practice Self-Care:** Engaging in activities that bring us comfort and joy are especially important during challenging times. Consider ways to take care of yourself, and to support your children in practicing their own self-care. Some strategies include spending time with friends and loved ones, taking a walk, engaging in breathing or mindfulness exercises. If it is meaningful to you, don't hesitate to seek out religious and spiritual support from your religious leaders and community members.

**Watch for behavior changes:** Children may show you through their behavior that they are struggling with what they have seen or heard. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors that include nightmares or sleep problems.

**Help is available:** Seek out support from your child's pediatrician, school, or a counselor if you are concerned about their reactions, emotions, or behaviors.