

Talking with Your Children About Traumatic Events

Here are some tips for talking with your children when they have witnessed or heard about traumatic events:

Listen to your children: Ask your children what they have heard about the traumatic event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions. Do not assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be while they are engaged in an activity: drawing, sitting on a swing, or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. Be truthful, but don't tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the traumatic event, be clear that you will keep them safe and let them know adults (school, police, etc.) are working hard to make sure they will stay safe.

Pay attention to your reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the traumatic event, your children will be more easily reassured.

Monitor your child's access to media: It will help if young children do not watch news reports or see the front page of the newspaper. Young children who watch a traumatic event on the TV news may think the event is still ongoing or happening again.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior that they are still struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, insomnia, or bedwetting. They may feel guilty that they are responsible for the event, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible.

Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities—mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc.—reduces anxiety and helps children feel more in control.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and do not assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: For older children, this traumatic event may lead to a discussion about ways they can help others who have experienced a tragedy. You can also ask them if they know how to keep themselves safe when they are away from home. Traumatic events make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activities we engage in make us feel less vulnerable.