

Department of Family & Consumer Sciences

TALKING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES: GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNICATING TO CHILDREN DURING TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC NEWS

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Conversations about tragic events can provoke uncomfortable feelings. Despite our best efforts, the adults in children's lives may instinctually avoid talking about tragedies, which leads children to make up their own conclusions about tragic situations. More than anything, children need reassurance from the most trusted adults in their lives. Through open, honest and developmentally appropriate conversations, children will cope more effectively. This fact sheet aims to provide tips for parents, family members and other professionals who work with children on how best to communicate to children through tragedy and tragic news.

Guidance for Communicating through Tragedy

Do Your Homework

Planning in advance what you want to say will better prepare you for presenting the facts accurately and confidently. Research the event(s) and stick to the basics while leaving out the graphic details. Be prepared for questions like,

"Why would someone do this?"

"Am I safe?"

"Will this happen again?"



Find Out What They Already Know

At the start of the conversation, gauge what children already know by asking open-ended questions like, *"What have you heard about this?, What do you think is going on?"* Encourage children to start the conversation and invite them to ask questions as they come up. Allow children to tell their perspectives on the situation while gently correcting any misinformation.

Speak on Their Level

Phrase information at an appropriate level for their age and stage in development. Remember that it is okay to admit you do not have the answers or leave out details that you feel are too graphic to share.

- **Young children** (under 7) need simple, concrete explanations for what happened and how it affects them. For example, say “*A disaster happened far away and some people got hurt. There are doctors who are helping the people heal and the police are making sure it won’t happen again. We are safe here and now.*”
- **Older children** (age 8 and up) will ask for more detail of the events and how it affects them, their families and their community. For example, say, “*Today there was a disaster that happened in another country. Some people have gotten hurt. But police and the government are working hard to rescue the people and help them recover. They are also working to stop more people from getting hurt. We are safe, here and now, and people are working to keep us safe. I want you to know that I am here to talk about it more if you would like.*”
- For **children with disabilities**, be sure to speak at the intellectual level they are at instead of their chronological age. Also consider their developmental needs (temperament, personality, etc.) in deciding how best to support them after they learn the information.

Model Staying Calm and Emphasize Hope

Try to soothe your own emotions so you are calm before you discuss the information. As you discuss the information, cue into the child’s body language and emotional state. Model ways to stay calm, such as using deep-breathing or taking breaks. Highlight the positive over the tragic, without dismissing any feelings. For example, emphasizing how the community or specific individuals are coming to address the issue and protect others from harm should be emphasized over the details of the traumatic event or perpetrators.

Listen and Offer Reassurance

Children want to know that they are safe and that their families and communities are protected. Normalize their feelings and share your own feelings in a way that is easy to understand.

Limit Media Exposure

Children of all ages can benefit from limiting exposure to news about tragic events. Young children especially cannot interpret the media like older children can, so media exposure may be more traumatizing for young children or children with disabilities. While older children or teens can better understand and interpret the media, it is beneficial to enforce media breaks.

Encourage Self-Care

Continuing to check in with children about their feelings will help them to deal with emotions as they arise. Offer additional outlets for them to care for themselves, such as journaling, drawing, practicing deep breathing exercises, going on walks or doing something fun together. If children are really struggling, offer them professional help. Find a licensed psychologist by visiting: locator.apa.org or call the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Helpline: 1-800-560-5767

In Summary ...

DO ...	AVOID ...
✓ <i>Research the event, stick to the facts and plan your approach to starting the discussion.</i>	✗ <i>Winging the conversation or bringing it up before the child is ready to talk.</i>
✓ <i>Assess what children already know and correct misinformation.</i>	✗ <i>Assuming children know about the event.</i>
✓ <i>Speak at an appropriate level for their age and stage in development and developmental ability.</i>	✗ <i>Offering graphic detail of the event(s).</i>
✓ <i>Normalize their feelings.</i>	✗ <i>Oversharing your fears and anxieties about the event(s).</i>
✓ <i>Share basic facts about what you know.</i>	✗ <i>Stereotyping or assigning blame to the whole group or culture that the perpetrator belongs to.</i>
✓ <i>Admit that you do not have all the answers while acknowledging their concerns.</i>	✗ <i>Making up answers to their questions.</i>
✓ <i>Provide reassurance in the way they need it; listening, hugging, affirmations or just being together.</i>	✗ <i>Dodging difficult conversations about the event(s) or disregarding feelings.</i>
✓ <i>Pay attention to signs of struggle; sudden changes in their behavior, sleep or health may signal a need for professional help.</i>	✗ <i>Assuming sudden changes in their behavior, emotions or health is phase.</i>

Learn More

1. Child Mind Institute, “Helping Children Cope with Frightening News”
<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-cope-frightening-news>
2. The National Child Trauma Stress Network, “How to Support Children After a Crisis”
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//after_a_crisis_helping_young_children_heal.pdf
3. 9/11 Memorial & Museum, “Talking with Children and Families About Terrorism”
<https://www.911memorial.org/learn/youth-and-families/talking-children-about-terrorism>
4. American Psychological Association, “How to Talk to Children about Difficult News”
<https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/talking-children>
5. National Council on Family Relations, “How to Talk to Children About Tragedies”
<https://www.ncfr.org/resources/resource-collections/how-talk-children-about-tragedies>
6. KidCentral Tennessee, “How to Talk to Children About Tragic Events”
<https://www.kidcentraltn.com/support/crisis-services-for-children/how-to-talk-to-children-about-tragic-events.html>
7. American Academy of Pediatrics, “How to Support Your Child’s Resilience in a Time of Crisis”
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-to-Support-Your-Childs-Resilience-in-a-Time-of-Crisis.aspx>



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