

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

It seems that every day, something tragic happens somewhere in the world, such as school shootings, fatal car collisions, extreme weather conditions and terrorist attacks. Children's lives are touched by trauma on a regular basis, no matter how much parents or teachers try to keep the "bad things" away. Instead of shielding



Guiding the Conversation

Find a quiet moment. For parents, this could be after dinner or bedtime. For teachers, this could be after recess or lunch if a student seems troubled. This is time and place where your children can be the center of your attention.

Find out what they know. For example, there was a shooting at a school or a bomb set off in another country. Ask them "What have you heard about this?" And then listen. Listen. Listen. And listen more.

Think about what you want to say or how you want to respond. Some advanced planning may need to take place to make the discussion easier. If you do need to think about it, acknowledge the child's feelings and get back to them soon. You don't want to be "off the top of your head."

Share your feelings with the child. It is OK to acknowledge your feelings with children. They see you are human. They also get a chance to see that even though upset, you can pull yourself together and continue on. Parents and teachers hear it often: Be a role model. This applies to emotions, too.

Tell the truth. Lay out the facts at a level they can understand. You do not need to give graphic details. For example, young children may not fully understand what death means and you may have to explain it in a way they can understand, such as no longer feeling anything, not hungry, thirsty, scared, or hurting; we will never see them again, but can hold their memories in our hearts and heads). Remember, it is OK to say "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." It's also OK to say "I'm not sure" or "I don't know."

Above all, reassure. At the end of the conversation, reassure the child that you will do everything you know how to do to keep them safe and to watch out for them. Reassure them that you will be available to answer any questions or talk about this topic again in the future. Reassure them that they are cared for.