

Helping children cope: Tips for talking about tragedy

After a tragedy, you might feel helpless — but your child needs your support. Here's help knowing what to say.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

When a tragedy — such as a natural disaster, mass shooting or terrorist attack — occurs, it can be hard to talk to your child about what happened. How do you explain it? How much will he or she understand? Find out how to start the conversation and what you can do to help your child cope.

Do I need to talk to my child about a tragedy?

Talking to your child about a tragedy can help him or her understand what's happened, feel safe and begin to cope. If you don't speak to your child about a tragedy, there's a chance that he or she might hear about it elsewhere.

How do I start a conversation with my child about a tragedy?

Take time to think about what you want to say. If possible, choose a time when your child is most likely to want to talk, such as before dinner. Ask your child what he or she already knows about the tragedy — and what questions or concerns he or she might have. Let your child's answers guide your discussion.

How do I explain the tragedy to my child?

Tell the truth. Focus on the basics, and avoid sharing unnecessary details. Don't exaggerate or speculate about what might happen. Avoid dwelling on the scale or scope of the tragedy.

Listen closely to your child for misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears. Provide accurate information. Share your own thoughts and remind your child that you're there for him or her. Reassure your child that what happened isn't his or her fault.

Your child's age will affect how he or she processes information about a tragedy. Consider these tips:

- **Preschool children.** Get down to your child's eye level. Speak in a calm and gentle voice using words your child understands. Explain what happened and how it might affect your child. For example, after a severe storm you might say that a tree fell on electrical wires and now the lights don't work. Share steps that are being taken to keep your child safe and give hugs.

- **Elementary and early middle school children.** Children in this age range might have more questions about whether they're truly safe. They might need help separating fantasy from reality.
- **Upper middle school and high school children.** Older children will want more information about the tragedy and recovery efforts. They're more likely to have strong opinions about the causes, as well as suggestions about how to prevent future tragedies and a desire to help those affected.

How might my child react?

After a tragic event, your child might experience a range of emotions, including fear, shock, anger, anxiety and grief. Your child's age will affect how he or she handles the stress of a tragedy. For example:

- **Preschool children.** Children in this age range might have trouble adjusting to change or loss. They might become clingy or mimic your emotions. Some children might also revert to wetting the bed or sucking their thumbs. Avoid criticizing your child for this behavior.
- **Elementary and early middle school children.** Children in elementary and early middle school might have nightmares or other sleep problems. They might fear going to school, have trouble paying attention in school or become aggressive for no clear reason.
- **Upper middle school and high school children.** Older children might deny that they're upset. Some children might complain of physical aches and pains because they're unable to identify what's really bothering them. Others might start arguments or resist authority.

These reactions are normal. However, if your child continues to display these behaviors for more than two to four weeks, he or she might need more help coping. If your child has experienced previous trauma, remember that he or she might be at greater risk of a severe reaction. If you're concerned about your child's reaction, talk to a mental health provider.

What can I do to help my child cope?

You can take steps to help your child process what happened. For example:

- **Remain calm.** Your child will look to you for cues about how to react. It's OK for children to see adults sad or crying, but consider excusing yourself if you're experiencing intense emotions.

- **Reassure your child of his or her safety.** Point out factors that ensure your child's immediate safety and the safety of the community. Consider reviewing your family's plans for responding to a crisis.
- **Limit media exposure.** Don't allow young children to repeatedly see or hear coverage of a tragedy. Even if your young child is engrossed in play, he or she is likely aware of what you're watching — and might become confused or upset. Older children might want to learn more about a tragedy by reading or watching TV. However, avoid repetitive loops of news information once you have the facts. Constant exposure to coverage of a tragedy can heighten anxiety.
- **Avoid placing blame.** If the tragedy was caused by human violence or error, be careful not to blame a cultural, racial or ethnic group, or people who have mental illnesses.
- **Maintain the routine.** To give your child a sense of normalcy, keep up your family's usual dinner, homework and bedtime routine.
- **Spend extra time together.** Special attention can foster your child's sense of security. Spend a little more time reading to your child or tucking him or her in at night. If your child is having trouble sleeping, allow him or her to sleep with a light on or to sleep in your room for a short time. Extra cuddles might help, too.
- **Encourage the expression of feelings.** Explain that it's OK to be upset or cry. Let your child write about or draw what he or she is feeling. Physical activity might serve as an outlet for feelings or frustration. If your child is acting out, explain that there are other ways of coping.
- **Seek out school resources.** If your child's school offers counseling after a tragedy, take advantage of the opportunity to meet with a counselor.
- **Do something for those affected by the tragedy.** Consider ways that you and your child can help victims and their families. You might take your child to your place of worship or write thank-you notes to first responders.

What else can I do?

It might be the last thing on your mind, but caring for yourself after a tragedy is important. Pay attention to your own feelings of grief, anger or anxiety. Lean on loved ones for support or talk to a mental health provider. Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and stay active. Taking care of yourself will enable you to care for your child and serve as a role model for how to cope.