

Helping Children Cope with School Violence

Incidents of school violence have shocked and saddened the nation, and left concerned parents wondering how their children could be affected. This handout offers helpful information on how to speak to your child(ren) about the violence; how to help ease their anxieties and fears; and how to protect them from future violence.

How Will Children Respond To A Tragedy?

With the media's coverage of acts of violence in our schools, virtually all children will be aware of school violence. Yet how they respond will vary depending on a child's age, personality and maturity level. Some children, particularly those age nine and under, may be unable to grasp the reality of the tragedy, or comprehend that violence could affect their own lives. Others may be frightened that something could happen to them. And still others may attempt to protect themselves through denial, cynicism or apathy. Regardless of how your child responds, he or she will be looking to you for answers, guidance and support.

How Can Parents Help?

Speak to your child about any incidents of school violence, openly and honestly, adapting your conversations to the age of your child. Children deserve honest answers, regardless of their age. In addition, the following tips may help:

Encourage your child to express his or her feelings. Children usually feel better when they can talk about their feelings. To help your child sort out his or her feelings, ask specific questions such as "How do you feel? Does it make you feel scared? What worries you the most?" Encourage your child to be honest and open, and listen carefully for clues about hidden feelings or worries.

Reassure your child. Respond to your child's feelings; acknowledge his or her fears; and continually reassure your child that he or she is safe. Stress that this was a rare incident, but avoid making false promises such as "Nothing like this will ever happen to you." Instead, offer your love, support and guidance and say things such as "I am here to protect you and to help keep you safe." In addition, remind your child that his or her teachers and the police are also looking out for his or her safety.

Monitor the media. Monitor and limit the amount of television your child watches. If your child sees disturbing footage of incidents of school violence, his or her fears and anxieties may escalate.

Speak to your child's school administrators. Ask your child's teachers and/or school principal how they have addressed school violence. Many schools speak to students about safety issues, and reassure them that they are doing everything possible to keep the children safe.