



How to talk with kids about a community tragedy

Gun violence is more common in some communities than in others, but unintentional shootings, gun suicides, and intentional shootings can happen anywhere. When a gun-related tragedy occurs in your community or appears on the news, children and teens are likely to hear people talking about it. They may feel scared or worried, even if they don't fully understand the situation. Kids who live in communities with high rates of gun violence may live with the constant fear that gun violence will affect them or someone they love.

When kids hear about gun violence, whether it happened in the local community or farther away, they respond to these events in different ways. They may feel physically ill, have sleep issues, or have difficulty concentrating.

Parents and other trusted adults in a child's life can provide support and help them process what they've heard about community violence in an age-appropriate way.

Ask open-ended questions

If possible, let the child or teen lead the conversation. Start with curiosity. Ask them what they've heard and how they feel about it—and then listen to what they say. Young children may be confused about what has happened, while older kids and teens may have seen news stories or social media posts and want more information.

Once you know what's on their mind, you can validate their feelings and tailor your response. After a community tragedy, kids of all ages may need reassurance that they are safe and protected.

"What have you heard about this event?"

"How does that make you feel?"

"It's normal to be scared or upset after something like this."

Why this works

Listening to the child's perspective allows you to answer their questions with a level of detail that feels appropriate for their age level and emotional state.

Community violence

The team behind Sesame Street share tips for talking with kids of different ages about violent events that occur in their community. [Visit SesameWorkshop.org/topics/violence to learn more.](https://www.sesameworkshop.org/topics/violence)

Encourage kids to share their feelings about the community tragedy

After a traumatic event, young people pay attention to the reactions and responses of the adults around them. Even if you are upset, do your best to stay calm and validate their emotions. If you are feeling similar emotions, acknowledge that. Focus on creating a safe, healing environment for the children in your life.

Let kids know they can talk about anything with you, and that it's normal to feel confused or emotional after a tragedy. Younger kids may be frightened, while older ones may want to discuss how the community is responding or how news outlets are covering the event. Kids of all ages may benefit from expressing themselves creatively after a crisis.

Encourage kids to share their feelings about the community tragedy

(Continued)

"Do you have any questions about what happened?"

"Sometimes, being creative helps people process their emotions. Do you think it might help to write, draw, or paint?"

"What have you noticed about how the media covers this event and others like it?"

Why this works

When a community tragedy occurs, encouraging kids to talk about it and share their emotions is part of the recovery process.

Talk about the community tragedy in an age-appropriate way

With young children who haven't heard about what happened, you may be tempted to hide it from them. If the child is old enough to understand the basics, consider explaining it to them in simple terms. It's better for them to learn about a community tragedy from you than to overhear a conversation that scares or confuses them.

If older kids have misconceptions about what happened, talk with them about the facts and how people are responding.

After a tragedy, kids of all ages may find it reassuring to hear how community members are supporting one another. If you've heard about ways that people are taking action to support those affected or to prevent gun violence in the community, share them with the child in an age-appropriate way.

"One person made a bad choice and other people got hurt. It's very sad, but lots of grownups are working hard to keep everyone safe."

"What do you think the people affected by this would find helpful?"

"Not everything you see about this on the news or on social media is 100% accurate. Sometimes people want to learn more right away, so they share information before they have all the facts."

Why this works

Talking to kids in an age-appropriate way about a violent event in the community helps them separate rumors from facts. Understanding what happened, and how the community is recovering, can help reduce kids' fear and anxiety.

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After the chat

- If a child comes to you with questions that you aren't sure how to answer, let them know you will try to find answers and get back to them. Be sure to follow up.
- Revisit the topic on a regular basis. Kids may have more questions as they process what happened.
- If you're a parent or caregiver, stick to your normal routines. A predictable schedule provides kids with a sense of security.
- Avoid watching or listening to violent news reports near young children. Even if they are busy with something else, they may hear things that upset them.
- Be alert for any behavior changes. If a child has recurring nightmares, becomes unusually clingy, or seems more withdrawn, they may need professional help.
- Be mindful of your own mental state. If you need support, talk to other trusted adults or a therapist. If the news or social media is upsetting you, allow yourself to take a break from it.

**If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis,
call or text 988 to be connected with the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.**

Learn how to have the conversation at [AgreeToAgree.org](https://www.agreetoagree.org)

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