

Tips for Parents of School Age Children: Helping Your Children Manage Distress in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shooting

As a parent, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children about a shooting rampage on a university campus. It is important to remember that children look to their parents to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what age your children are, be they toddlers, adolescents, or even young adults. Consider the following tips for helping your children manage their distress.

Talk with your child – Talking to your children about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them. What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there listening to them.

- Find times when they are most likely to talk: such as when riding in the car, before dinner, or at bedtime.
- Start the conversation; let them know you are interested in them and how they are coping with the information they are getting.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view; don't interrupt--allow them to express their ideas and understanding before you respond.
- Express your own opinions and ideas without putting down theirs; acknowledge that it is okay to disagree.
- Remind them you are there for them to provide safety, comfort and support. Give them a hug.

Keep home a safe place –Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the solitude or comfort they need. Plan a stay at home night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity.

Watch for signs of stress, fear or anxiety – After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work, or changes in appetite. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear after a while. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.

Take "news breaks" – Your children, especially teenagers and young adults, may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the internet, television, or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also, scheduling some breaks for yourself is important; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy. Try to do something that includes family members as well as your children's friends.

Take care of yourself – Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.

These tips and strategies can help you guide your children through the current crisis. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, you may want to consider talking to someone who could help. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living.

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