



COLORADO
Office of School Safety
Department of Public Safety

700 Kipling Street, Ste 1000
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Dear Fellow Coloradans:

Once again a senseless shooting has happened at a school with innocent lives lost. We mourn for those victims, their families and friends in Georgia.

I know these events bring up prior traumas suffered elsewhere including here in Colorado. Please be mindful of that with the children and adults in your life. Please know that the Office of School Safety and all of the school staff across our state work each day to protect our students and staff. We will continue to be vigilant.

Please remind your children that we know these events are scary and that the adults in their schools are taking precautions every day for their safety. Let's all remember to use Safe2Tell if anything out of the ordinary comes to our attention.

Thank you!

Chris Harms

Resources



Talking to children about terrorist attacks and school and community shootings in the news

This guide offers advice on how to talk to children about tragic events, such as shootings and terrorist attacks, that they are likely to hear about at school and/or on the news.



THEY WILL ASK WHAT HAPPENED

Children and teenagers are better able to cope with upsetting news when they understand more about the event. They need information just as adults do. Begin by asking what they already understand about what happened. They have likely heard about the event on TV, on the internet or social media, at school, or from their friends.

However, much of their information may not be accurate. As they explain what they know about the event, you can figure out what it is they don't already know or understand. Look for misunderstandings or frightening rumors. Tell the truth and do not try to mislead them "for their own good." Children and youth of different ages understand and react differently according to their developmental age and unique personal experiences. It is important to remember that we cannot assume that children's worries are the same as our own. When we listen to children and come to understand their feelings and worries, we can better help them make sense of these experiences and how they affect us all.

The amount of details that children will find useful will depend upon their age. The older the child is, the more details will likely be needed to answer their questions and address their concerns. Provide the basic information in simple and direct terms and then ask for questions. Take your cues from children in determining how much information to provide. Older children may wish to discuss the larger implications of the event. Provide reassurance whenever possible. Our government, police, and schools are taking steps to protect us from something like this happening again and to keep us safe. Children often look for reassurance that they are now safe after such graphic reminders of danger and hatred.

Terrorist acts and school and community shootings remind us all that we are never completely safe – but now is the best time

to reassure children that they can and should feel safe in their school, in their home, and in their community. While it is useful for children to know enough about what has happened to feel that they understand what has occurred and what they should do, it isn't helpful for children (or adults) to be exposed to graphic images or information or to continuous or repetitive media coverage. Such images and details are often included in coverage of the event on television, radio and print media, as well as in social media and elsewhere on the internet. Limit the amount of exposure to media coverage and discussion in social media. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis event, it's a good time to turn off television, computers, and smart phones and come together as a family and community for discussion and support.

COULD I HAVE DONE ANYTHING TO PREVENT THIS?

After a tragic event, we all wonder what we and others could have done to prevent this from happening.

Even when it is obvious that there is nothing children could have done to prevent or minimize the crisis, they may still feel helpless and wish they could have changed what happened. Let children know that this is a common reaction; we all wish that there is something we could have done to prevent this or any tragedy. Instead, suggest that together you can concentrate on what can be done now to help those most directly affected and to promote safety, tolerance and acceptance in our communities.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

In some ways, blaming is a way to feel as if you can regain control of uncomfortable feelings and a sense of personal risk.

While it is natural to engage in thoughts of blame, this doesn't ease the immediate feelings of grief and fear nor does it provide any solutions for the future. It is understandable that people would be angry at the individuals who commit acts of terrorism and hatred, but sadly sometimes people are also angry at those people that are easier to find and blame – such as people who look like they might belong to a larger group that includes those who were responsible.

Children should be told that although it is common to feel angry, terrorists and those that commit violent acts do not represent a particular racial, ethnic, religious or other group. The violence may also cause children and teenagers to become frightened that they may be targeted by people because they may fear others do not approve of who they are. We as Americans take pride in having members of many different races, religions, sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together and continue to be inclusive, accepting and supportive of all who seek peace.

IS THIS GOING TO CHANGE MY LIFE?

This is a question that we all struggle to answer, not only for children but also for ourselves. Especially in difficult times, children may act immaturely. Teenagers may want to spend more time with their peers. Children and teenagers are often very concerned about themselves. When there is a tragic event, they may become even more concerned about what affects them personally. Adults who do not understand this may see this as being selfish or uncaring. It is important to make children feel comfortable in asking questions and expressing their feelings.

Expect children to think more about themselves for the time being. Once they feel reassured that they are being listened to and their needs will be met, they are more likely to be able to start to think about the needs of others.

CAN I HELP?

Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to help. While there may be little that they can do now to help the immediate victims of a particular crisis, there is a lot they can do to help. They can start by taking care of themselves – telling you when they are upset or worried, being honest and open. They can also offer help to other members of their community – their friends and classmates, their teacher, and other adults. Over time, they can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for the victims and survivors.

I DON'T WANT TO MAKE THINGS WORSE, SO SHOULD I SAY NOTHING INSTEAD?

Often what children and teenagers need most is to have someone they trust listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing the perfect thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns and thoughts, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep children from ever having to hear about something like this, reality does not allow this. Being silent on the issue won't protect them from what happened, but only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that answers and reassurance should be at the level of the child's understanding.

WHAT IF THIS UPSETS THEM?

During these discussions, children may show that they are upset – they may cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are upset. Remember, it is the events that are upsetting them, not the discussion. Talking about the event will permit them the opportunity to show you how upset they really are. This is the first step in coping with their feelings and adjusting to their new understanding of the world. Pause the conversation periodically so that you can provide support and comfort and ask if they wish to continue the discussion at another time. But it is helpful for children to realize that it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

SHOULD I BRING IT UP EVEN IF THEY DON'T ASK QUESTIONS? WHAT IF THEY DON'T SEEM TO WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

When a major crisis of this nature occurs, it is a good idea to bring the topic up with children, no matter how young they are. At first, older children and teenagers may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is generally not a good idea to force them to talk with you, but do keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Be available when they are ready to talk, but let them choose the time.

Often children find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling instead of talking about themselves.

HOW CAN I TELL IF CHILDREN NEED MORE THAN I CAN PROVIDE? WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR SUCH HELP?

When a terrorist attack or school or community shooting occurs, most people will be upset. However, should children continue to be very upset for several days and be unable to recover from their fears, or if they are having trouble in school, home or with their friends, then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. The event may have triggered other distressing experiences, worries or concerns they have. You may wish to speak with a teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they need counseling – you should take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

IF I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS, WHERE CAN I TURN FOR ANSWERS?

For more resources, visit SchoolCrisisCenter.org, the website of the **National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB)**, or contact the Center at 1-877-536-2722.

For information on how to support children who are grieving, visit GrievingStudents.org, the website of the **Coalition to Support Grieving Students**.



This information is provided as a part of the Colorado School Safety Resource Center's commitment to provide consultation, resources, training, and technical assistance to foster safe and secure learning environments, positive school climates, and early intervention to prevent crisis situations.

Talking to Children about School Safety: For School Personnel

Information for children should be based entirely on their need, developmental age, and relationship/proximity to the crisis event. The goal is to reassure students that although there is always a possibility of violence occurring in a school, the probability of a school experiencing a high-profile violent act is extremely low. The following are some suggested general key points that can be adapted to your school or classroom or for parents. See developmental guidelines below.

Key Messages:

1. Schools are safe places. Our school staff works with your parents and local police and fire departments, etc. to keep you safe.
2. We all play important role in school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened, or if you hear threats of dangerous behavior or suicide.
3. There is a difference between reporting dangerous behavior, and tattling, “narcing”, or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear. Remind them of Safe2Tell Reporting Line (1-877-542- 7233) or other anonymous tip lines. Please make sure the posters are visible in your building.
4. Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the possibility of something happening and probability that it will affect you and our school community.
5. Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
6. Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from a mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
7. Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
8. Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solutions by participating in violence prevention programs at schools, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, or other emotions they cannot control.

Helpful Guidelines to Keep in Mind When Talking with Children about School Safety

1. **Any conversation with a student must be developmentally appropriate.**
 - a. Young children need brief simple information that should be balanced with reassurance that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. They are not





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able to process the complexities of violence in the same way that adolescents and young adults are prepared to discuss the issue. Young children often gauge how threatening or serious an event is by adult reactions. Listen for misinformation or misconceptions and share facts as developmentally appropriate. Young children respond well to basic assurance by adults and simple examples of school safety, like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

- b. Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they are truly safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
- c. Upper middle school and high school students may have strong and varying opinions about causes of violence in school and society. They may share concrete suggestions about how to make the school safer and how to prevent such tragedies. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for their emotional needs.

2. Keep communication open between schools and parents.

Schools are encouraged to keep parents informed about how they are responding to student questions and any type of support that has been available for students struggling with any crisis. If teachers working with older students choose to have classroom discussion about the event linked to their instructional activities, parents should be made aware of these activities and any suggestions for following up at home should be offered.

3. Make time if children want to talk and observe children's emotional state.

Let student questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Watch for clues that they might want to talk, but understand that not all children will want or need to talk about these events. Encourage parents to talk with children, validate their feelings and observe their child's emotional state. Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Be aware of signs that children might be in distress, e.g., changes in behavior, anxiety, sleep problems, acting out, problems at school or with academic work.

4. Be conscious of media exposure and what adults say about the event.

Limit television viewing (be aware if the television is on in common areas). Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of the conversations that they have with each other and in front of children, even teenagers. Limit children's exposure to comments that might be misunderstood.

5. Reinforce student strengths and focus on normal routines and activities.

Some high-profile school tragedies may prompt a public response depending upon the developmental levels of the students and the school or community's history of related events,





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or proximity to the crisis. Normal routines help establish a sense of calm and predictability important to maintaining effective learning environments.

6. Consider the cultures, traditions, religious and family/community values of students in any school response.

It is important that schools respect the values, traditions, beliefs and customs of the students and their families impacted by the crisis. Remember, not everyone processes strong emotions through conversation. Some children and adults may need to respond through art, poetry, prayer, or activity.

7. Find support if needed.

Encourage students to seek out a mental health staff member or counselor if they have a continuing need to talk about the event. It is also important that caring adults find support and have an opportunity to process events away from students, if needed. Provide information and access to community resources, as available. Take good care of the caregivers and seek support for yourself, if needed!

Adapted from: National Association of School Psychologists (2006). Tips for school administrators for reinforcing school safety. Bethesda, MD: NASP.

