

How to Talk to your Children about Tragic Events

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

With so many tragic events reported in the news and some of them hitting close to home, it becomes imperative that we find ways to frame these events for our children.

Just recently, we were shocked by the bombings at the Boston Marathon and the bloody police battles that followed. A few months prior to that, we mourned the 20 children and six adult staff members who were killed in the mass shooting that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

In the past month here in Cecil County, we witnessed an intrusion at Holly Hall Elementary School by a drunken man who assaulted 7 people, including four schoolchildren. Even more alarming was the murder of a 10-year-old child that occurred near the Port Deposit home that she was visiting.

Children may become scared when they hear about these events. As parents, we may become scared as well. So what can we do about it?

With all these events, it seems that the world has become more violent. It seems that way but data shows otherwise. In the U.S., violent crime is down. Bureau of Justice Statistics show the rate of violent crime victimization in the United States declined by more than two thirds between the years 1994 and 2009.

But what is different is our exposure to it. Frightening and violent crimes make headlines. Details and pictures are splashed before our eyes by all sources of media. These crimes become top news stories. They make the front pages of newspapers. They're the lead stories on TV news programs. They're reported on radio and are repeated endlessly on the internet.

What happens when we experience this type of exposure, this constant bombardment of images and descriptions of violent events? We can become overwhelmed.

When we experience these feelings, what can we do for ourselves? And what do we tell our children?

The first thing we need to remember is to take care of ourselves, to manage our own emotions. We need to reduce our fears by using healthy coping skills such as talking with others or doing some relaxation exercises. It may also help to remind ourselves that these types of crimes are rare events and almost surely will not happen to us or to our family.

Just a note here too: We need to make sure our children don't overhear us talking to others about how frightened we are over a particular event. If our children believe that we feel safe, they'll feel safe.

Talking with Our Children

Here are some recommendations from Suanne Blumberg, Division Director of Children's Programs at Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services:

Talking does help. When something bad happens and it's all over the media, the most important thing with your children is to talk about it. The topic needs to be open to discussion. You do not need to describe all the details of the event, in fact it's better not to, but you do not want to ignore the event. If your kids know about it, plan to talk about it.

Manage the flow of information and the kind of information your children receive. For example, you don't want your kids to see repeated images or hear repeated news with all the gruesome detail. You can turn off your TV. You can limit access to the internet. Obviously, the more graphic the images and text, the more you should restrict. This is especially true for younger children.

When you talk with your kids about these events, ensure that your discussion is age-appropriate. Consider your child's level of understanding. How much can he or she comprehend about the level of violence that occurred? As a parent, what you would tell your 5-year-old will be different from what you would say to your 14-year-old.

Children will not be talking with just you about frightening events. They will hear things from other children. So each day, invite them to tell you what they've learned and heard that day. Just listen first and try your best to understand how your child feels about what they have heard. Help them process the information. Correct any misconceptions they may have (for example, that school is a dangerous place or school violence happens everywhere every day.)

After a scary event, be sure to check with your children to learn if they have become concerned about their own safety. If they have, take time to understand their emotions. Hear them out. Learn what's causing the fear. Reassure them that "things are safe here in our house." You can reassure them that you will continue to lock the doors and windows and double-check them routinely. You can also offer to look in on your child at night to make sure she's safe. For older kids, you can give them something more rational. For example, remind them how rare these events really are, and even give them some data that proves it.

Also reassure your children by doing things together as a family. This provides support for your child. Go out to dinner as a family. Invite friends over. Play a game together. Sit outside on the porch. Basically you're showing that your family is safe.

Often we feel as if our life is out of balance when an alarming event has happened in the community or in our nation. This can be even more pronounced in children. So, doing things together as a family helps to restore that balance. Most importantly, make sure to continue your family routines. If you always go to baseball practice with your child, keep it up. This shows unity and helps him or her maintain a sense of security.

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