

Helping Children Talk about Hard Things

How do we talk to children about a tragedy like this? One of our instincts is to shield them from these conversations. And yet, often they are very aware of high-profile situations, learning from friends, television or social media about the events going on around them. Without trusted adults to talk to, they may hold on to misinformation or even fill in gaps in their understanding with their imaginations. Below is summary of how to help your children, based on some very useful resources linked below. Please reach out with any questions or concerns. I am happy to talk with you at any time: fern.seiden@sau26.org.

Helping Elementary Children

The National Association for School Psychologists stresses that young children who are exposed to media images may have difficulty interpreting them, and misunderstandings can easily take root. Adults need not force participation in conversations but checking in with children is important. It is helpful to offer reassurance about personal safety, keep information brief and simple, and avoid scary information.

- Reduce exposure to media
- Maintain normal routines
- Monitor emotional states, and,
- Promote home-school communication when specific situations arise in either location.

Older Children and Youth

Older children might have more questions about the event itself or be emotionally reactive to news. It is important to show empathy and work to understand their point of view. With so much exposure to social media, it will be helpful to guide older children toward trustworthy news sources. Additionally, young people may need help moderating the amount of disturbing or graphic news they consume. It is important to check-in with them often and to talk about what they are thinking and feeling. In school, offering opportunities for guided discussions and focusing on how they can contribute to safety in their school can help.

Start with Your Own Self-Regulation

Work to understand and process your own emotional reactions, so that when you are talking with your child you can provide them with support and a sense of safety. If you are emotionally overwhelmed it may interfere with your ability to offer reassurance and empathy.

Open Ended Questions

What do you think about that?

What is it like for you?

What can we do if that happens?

What have you heard?

From: [Very Well Family](#)

Listen and Offer Reassurance

During conversations with children, we can answer questions, help children identify feelings, clarify thinking, and correct misinformation or misunderstandings. We can set a reassuring and supportive tone during conversations by talking about the ways that our schools are safe, putting this tragic situation in perspective. ***“I know this is hard. It is hard for everyone...Schools are actually very safe places, and in Merrimack, we do many things to keep you safe. Let’s name them.”***

Know that if a child is upset during the conversation, it is about the event, not the conversation. Expressing the emotion will help.

We Don't Have to Have All the Answers. Nonverbal Communication Speaks Volumes.

It is helpful to remember that we don't have to have all the answers when we show empathy for someone. We can hold a safe space for our children to experience uncomfortable feelings and help them process emotions by actively listening: *"It sounds like you are feeling _____. That makes sense. I feel that too sometimes. I'm here right now and you are safe."*

Finally, even if it is hard to find the right words, it is important to know that our non-verbal communication is extremely powerful in setting the tone and helping a child feel safe and reassured. Eye contact, focused attention, and warmth will help children regain a sense of safety through their attunement with adults.

Access Coping Skills

Conversations with children of all ages can be paired with a discussion about coping skills, such as tapping into social connections, using one's imagination, doing physical activities, expressing emotions, or engaging with cognitive activities, such as puzzles or problem solving. *"We will get through this together – what do you need right now?"*

Help Others

Finding ways to help others during a crisis can feel empowering during a time when we often feel most powerless. These types of activities help kids feel connected to others and foster a sense of belonging and affiliation. This moves the conversation from "I feel," to "we can."

Resources:

[The National Association for School Psychologists \(NASP\) has put together a thorough, brief guide that offers insight about how to respond in developmentally appropriate ways to support young people during this time.](#)

A resource that offers helpful tips when these important conversations.
[National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. Talking to Children About Terrorist Attacks and School Shootings in the News.](#)

[Very Well Family offers open-ended questions you can ask your children to check-in with them.](#)