

Talking to Kids About Gun Violence



1. Put on your own air mask.

Practice self care. Research has shown that children as young as five understand when their parents are upset, angry, or anxious about current events. Processing the trauma of gun violence can feel incredibly overwhelming, but find ways to cope and manage emotions. Your children look to you as role models, so if you can't practice self care for yourself, do it for them.

2. Emphasize ways in which you are safe: in this moment and in this space.

One of the most deeply troubling facts of parenthood is that we cannot keep our children safe at all times. We can keep our children safe moment to moment, and identifying what is in place can be very affirming for children of all ages. Point out ways that seat belts and carseats keep bodies safe, identify smoke detectors in your home, note doors you can exit through, name people you know and trust.

3. Answer questions honestly.

When we are silent, especially in the wake of violence or tragedy, children's minds fill in the gaps for us. If your children ask about a picture they see or a part of a story they hear, it is critical that you answer them honestly. Choose how much information you share, depending on your children's ages, stages, and needs. It's always better to say "I don't know," or to share your own emotions with your children, but avoiding conversation sends scary messages to children.

4. Ask questions.

Find out what your children already know, and where they learned that information from. Focus questions on how they are feeling, and listen closely to their answers. Children may express fear or concern that a violent action will happen again or they may express anger with people they associate with the event.

5. Use narratives to process complex stories and feelings.

Parents and caregivers of young children frequently read story books aloud. Imagine sharing new stories through words, images, or play with children of all ages. Our brains are sometimes unable to fully process experiences that challenge basic understandings of the world; using stories and play can give children an opportunity to make sense of those experiences and emotions, while still being a step removed from the experience. Stories may be used to directly tell traumatic experiences, may offer alternatives to those experiences, or may explore things through different angles completely.

6. Consider ages and stages.

One of the biggest questions parents ask when stepping into this conversation is: "How much should I tell them?" It depends on your children. Consider how old they are, what developmental stage they're in, what working knowledge they come to the table with, and how they manage their own emotions. Young, early learners need simple stories to process trauma; this may sound like: "A man was very angry and hurt a lot of people." Elementary-age children can engage in deeper questions and hear more of the story; their vocabulary may be limited and it is helpful to focus on emotion and safety. As children get closer to tween and teen ages, it is often important that they understand the facts of the event.

7. Encourage your children to engage in self care.

Notice when your children need to take breaks, and share resources for them to do so. Offer calming materials, hugs, music, food, people, etc. You know what comforts your children: it's important to remind them that they have ways to find comfort even in difficult times.

8. Help when you can, how you can.

Remember that actions speak louder than words. Spend time with your children and figure out ways you can help those impacted by violence directly. Learn more about gun violence and take part in local advocacy actions. Collect and donate money to issues you identify with. Connect with communities who are impacted by violence regularly, and find ways to volunteer.

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Recommended Reading

- [Being a Helper: Supporting Children to Feel Safe and Secure after Disasters](#), National Education for Young Children
- [In the Aftermath of a Shooting](#), American Psychological Association
- [How 10 Parents Talk to their Children about Gun Violence](#), Self.com
- [We Need to Talk....](#), Sarah Ruiz Grossman
- [White Privilege and Imaginary Play with Guns](#), Raising Race Conscious Kids
- [Children and Trauma](#), American Psychological Association
- [Don't Avoid Talking to Your Kids About the Pittsburgh Shooting](#), Sivan Zakai
- [Resource Guide - Responding to the Pittsburgh Tragedy](#), Jewish Education Project