

## Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

# How to Talk to your Kids about Scary Events in our World



BY KIM DeMARCHI

With the recent scary events in our world, how can we possibly answer our children's questions, when we don't even know why these events happened? How can we reassure them

that we'll keep them safe, when we suddenly aren't sure that we can? When tragedies shake our faith in our own sense of safety in the world, it's tough to talk with our children about it.

But, it is our responsibility as adults to communicate to our children that we can and will keep them safe. While we are at it, reassure yourself and your child that he or she is no less safe today than he or she was last week. The chances of your family being touched directly by such a tragedy are much, much, much less than the chances of a car accident and you get into a car every day. Emphasize that there are many more good people in the world making sure we are all safe, than bad people. If our tone of voice conveys confidence in the people who are ensuring our safety, then our children are reassured.

With all the constant media coverage, if there are kids under the age of thirteen at your house, your TV should stay off whenever there's a public tragedy, or you could be repeatedly traumatizing your kids. Knowing there's been a shooting is one thing. Hearing over and over about the blood and bodies and screams is quite another. Your children don't need those horrific images replaying in their minds. Even babies and toddlers who don't understand the news coverage show elevated stress hormones when exposed to upset voices.

Children are also extremely aware and pick up on the emotions of their parents. So it's our job as parents to manage our own emotions so they don't adversely affect our children. I know I've had some very raw emotions in recent days, and

because my children are teenagers, I can be more forthcoming, but I still need to use common sense. Remember, your child is taking his cues from you. If you're anxious or hysterical when you're on the phone with a friend talking about something scary in the news, you're giving your child the message that he's in danger and not safe--no matter what you say to him directly.

*Some additional tips for parents in talking to their young children about tragedies:*

**Be age-appropriate.** Babies and Toddlers will not need to know about a disaster at all. There is no need to raise the issue with your preschooler unless they have been exposed to it. Many preschool and school-age children will hear about the event from someone else and will need your help to process it. No need to over share however. Give only the most minimum details.

**Ask your child what she knows.** If they bring it up, start by finding out what they have heard. "What did you hear about that?" Listen to their answers before jumping in to explain. Repeat to be sure you've understood: "So Jimmy said that a bad guy drove into a group of people?" Ask your child what she thinks about the information. Most likely she will repeat what she's heard, but she may give you some insight into what she needs to hear from you. If your child doesn't bring it up, but you want to, say "You may have heard something really sad happened in England and I wanted to know what you had heard about that."

**Bring it to their level.** Children are very egocentric, and they want to know that they're okay, and the people around them are going to be okay. Basically, minimize it. "Something sad happened. People were hurt and killed, but people are looking after them and we are all very safe." That's the main question you want to be addressing.

Explain simply, using language your child can understand. Keep your explanation very simple: "This man was very sick in his head... His mind wasn't working right... He is dead now... He can't hurt anyone else now."

**Answer questions.** Your child may have questions about whether it will be safe for him to go out into his own neighborhood. The answer, of course, is yes:

"Luckily, most people's brains work just fine and most people are not violent..."

And the grown-ups in charge are making sure that your school and parks are completely safe." Your child may have heard that the person was angry, but here is the teachable moment ----assure him that we all get angry and it's never okay to hurt ourselves or somebody else because we are feeling angry. Tailor your explanation to your child's developmental understanding. With all ages, let your child talk as much as he or she will. Answer questions truthfully, but with as limited information as possible. There is no reason to give your child details he isn't asking you for.

**Listen and allow feelings.** If your child senses that she isn't allowed to get upset, cry or show you that she's frightened or upset, then she'll push those feelings down inside, where they'll cause nightmares or anxiety. If, instead, you accept and reflect your child's feelings, those feelings will tumble out for a few days but then will dissipate. Remember that your child will almost certainly need to experience some terror she's holding in her body, which she will probably show you with aggression. If you can stay compassionate when she gets aggressive ("Sweetie, no hitting... You must be very upset to hit like that"), she'll show you the tears and fears behind her anger. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your child's fears, hug her, and reassure her that you will always keep her safe. Talking about it makes it less scary for children.

**Stress that this is a rare occurrence.** Be aware that your child will need your reassurance that although we are all connected, and we feel for the people who were touched by this tragedy, she is safe. Stress that incidents like this are very rare. Add that it's the job of grown-ups to keep kids safe, and that you and the other adults in your child's life will always work very hard to keep your child safe.



**Respect your child's individual reactions.** Every child processes in her own way. Some children will become very sad and cry, and that is to be honored. Some will listen, change the subject, and then bring it up to ask you more questions at bedtime. Others will shrug it off, which doesn't mean they aren't compassionate but that they can only handle so much of the information at a time.

Be prepared to offer your children repeated reassurance in times of tragedy. There's no way to make sense of these types of tragedies we've seen in recent months in our world, but you can use these times to talk about ordinary people who have shown great courage to help others. Heroism comes in many different forms and there are many more helpful people in our world than hurtful. Remind yourself too.

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