

Talking to your children after a school shooting

GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



When a school shooting occurs in our community, parents often wonder what to say to their children. These recommendations are informed by guidance from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB).

1 Start by finding out what your child knows.



- For school-age children who may have heard about the event, gently open the conversation.
- You might say: "Something very scary happened at a school in our community today. Have you heard anything about it?"
- Listen first. Ask what they have heard and what questions they have.
- Correct misinformation calmly.

2 Be honest, but keep details age-appropriate.



- Children need accurate information, not graphic descriptions.
- **Young children:** Use simple, concrete explanations. Avoid unnecessary details.
- **Elementary-age children:** Provide basic facts and answer their specific questions.
- **Teenagers:** Allow more detailed discussion, including their concerns and perspectives.
- It is okay to say, "I don't know yet," when information is uncertain.

3 Reassure without making promises you cannot guarantee.



- Children may ask, "Could this happen at my school?"
- Avoid promises such as "That could never happen here."
- Instead, you might say: "It's understandable to feel scared after something like this. There are adults whose job is to help keep you safe. We are going to keep talking about your worries and what we can do to help you feel safer."

4 Don't force children to talk about their feelings.



- Let children know you are available, but do not pressure them to share.
- Some children will want to talk repeatedly. Others may prefer playing, drawing, spending time with friends, or returning to familiar activities.
- All of these can be normal responses.

5 Limit exposure to news and social media.



- Repeated exposure to frightening images, videos, rumors, and graphic details can increase distress.
- Avoid leaving news coverage playing in the background.
- Monitor what children are seeing online, especially older children who may encounter disturbing material through social media.

6 Expect a range of reactions.



In the days following a frightening event, children may experience:

- Increased worry or clinginess
- Sleep difficulties or nightmares
- Irritability, sadness, or anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches
- Changes in behavior or temporary regression

Some children may show very little outward distress. That does not necessarily mean something is wrong.

7 Maintain routines and connection.



- Predictable routines, familiar activities, time together, and opportunities for play can help children regain a sense of security.
- Let your child know they can return to you with questions at any time.

Additional resources

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): Talking to Children About the Shooting: nctsn.org/resources/talking-children-about-shooting
- NCTSN: Talking to Youth When Scary Things Happen: nctsn.org/resources/talking-to-youth-when-scary-things-happen
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB): Talking to Kids About Tragedies: www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/talking-kids-about-tragedies

8 Know when to seek additional support.



- Consider consulting a qualified mental health professional if your child is experiencing:
 - Intense or persistent distress
 - Significant changes in functioning
 - School avoidance
 - Worsening sleep problems
 - Difficulty participating in everyday activities

Children who directly witnessed violence, were injured, or lost someone may benefit from specialized assessment and support even before persistent symptoms develop. You do not have to wait for symptoms to become severe before asking for help.