

The article below was sent to all Association of Independent Maryland and DC Schools members by the Executive Director, Peter Baily.

What do we tell our children?

Guidance for supporting children in response to tragedy

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The Dougy Center has provided grief support groups for children, teens, young adults and their parents or adult caregivers for 30 years. www.dougy.org

What do we tell our children? How do we reassure them of their own safety?

Here are some things for adults to keep in mind:

Don't project your fears onto your children.

You can't hear the news about violence to children without thinking about how you'd feel if they were your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors. The outpouring of care and empathy for the families who lost loved ones--children and adults alike--will be powerful, and...we all know it could have been our mall, our child's school, our city, our family members who died. Identifying with the senselessness and randomness makes us all feel more vulnerable. But we should remember that children don't always see things the same way that adults do, and it won't be helpful for them for us to fall apart. They need to see that we care, that we feel terrible about this tragedy, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Children will take their cues from our behavior.

Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the tragedy over and over.

Over-exposure to the graphic and emotional news can be overwhelming for children. Some children who repeatedly watched the footage of planes crashing into the towers on 9/11 thought it was happening again and again. Too much exposure can fuel their fear, so don't let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.

Understand that you can't completely shield them from what happened.

It would be next to impossible to hide this event from children, as much as we wish we could. ABC News health and medical writer, Dr. Richard Besser, in a blog the afternoon of the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, gave this advice in regards to children younger than 7: "Shield them from this. They don't need to know about it." ("Connecticut Shooting: What to Tell Your Kids")

I don't believe Dr. Besser understands the power of social media, even with young children. You might be able to shield your own child in your home, for example, by not turning on (or owning) a television, but you can't protect your children from hearing about it from other kids. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don't "need" to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.

Model truth-telling and build trust with your children by letting them hear things, even hard things, from you directly.

Here are some principles to keep in mind as you talk with children:

There is no one typical reaction one can or should expect from children.

Their responses will vary all over the map, from seeming disinterest to nightmares, eating issues and panic attacks. How any specific child will respond will depend on their age, previous experience with death and loss, their personality style. (Fearful children will tend to worry; quiet children may keep their feelings to themselves; those who want to appear unfazed may evidence a sense of bravado or lack of caring). Of course, children directly affected - those who had a family member die; those who witnessed the carnage; those who had friends die - will tend to have longer-term reactions and needs. Watch for changes in

behavior, or concerning trends. While it would be normal to have heightened anxiety and sleeplessness, any concerning behavior or troubling symptoms should be taken seriously, and if warranted, professional help sought.

Many children will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.

Understandably. So will many adults. While we can't guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that we will do everything we can to keep them safe.

So, how do we reassure our children?

We can't promise that nothing bad will ever happen. What we can do is let them know that what happened, as horrible as it was, doesn't happen very often. The people who committed the crimes died or are in custody, and no longer able to hurt anyone else. Some people's bad actions don't mean that everyone will do bad things.

Children want, need, and deserve the truth.

In 30 years of providing grief support to thousands of children and teens at The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families, we have never heard a child say, "I'm glad I was lied to." Many, however, struggle with anger and lack of trust toward parents or other adults who lied to them. When we don't tell the truth, they learn that we cannot be trusted. As difficult as it can be at times, and as horrendous as the truth may be, children want, need, and deserve the truth.