

## To Talk About The School Shooting

The tragedy that took place in Newtown, Connecticut is incomprehensible; children and adults alike are struggling with what to think and feel. As parents however, while it is a difficult subject, it is important to talk with our children about the events that took place. In fact, experts say that avoiding the topic can actually make the shooting seem more eminent and threatening in children's minds.

Experts also say that when it comes to traumatic events in general, a child does not have to personally experience it to feel the negative effects. With such widespread media coverage of the school shooting, many children anxiously watched this tragedy unfold, along with us adults. Even if you have tried to shield your adolescent from the horrific event, it is highly unlikely that he/she will not hear about it at school or learn more details through friends or social media.

- **Start the conversation and listen carefully:** Begin by asking what your child knows about the occurrence and what they are feeling. Listen closely for misinformation, misconceptions, and for underlying concerns and fears.
- **Reassurance is the key:** The concern for re-occurrence is likely on their minds. Children need to hear that you are doing exactly what you need to do to keep them safe at home and that school officials are taking every precaution necessary to keep them safe at their school. They also need to be reminded that their only job at school is to focus on learning and enjoying their time with their friends and classmates.
- **Encourage questions:** Without dwelling on frightening details, provide your child with accurate answers to their questions, and gently correct misinformation or misconceptions, when possible. Do not make this a one-time conversation; additional questions are likely to arise for your child as event details continue to emerge. Also, do not be afraid to acknowledge that you do not have all the answers.
- **Limit media exposure:** According to experts on child trauma, it is important to limit your adolescent's exposure to repeated images and sounds of the shooting. For younger children, experts say to not allow them to see or hear any shooting-related TV/radio messages. What may not be upsetting to an adult, may be very upsetting and confusing to a child. Be aware that if the TV or radio is on, children of all ages are likely to be tuned in, even if they do not appear to be paying attention. It is also important, as adults, to limit our media exposure related to the shooting, for our own mental health.
- **Share your feelings:** It is ok to express our sadness and empathy for the victims and their families with our children. At the same time, it is important to share ideas for coping. It can be helpful for children and adults to actively do something to support the families of Sandy Hook. For example, some schools are encouraging their students to wear green/white (Sandy Hook Elementary school colors) to show their support, while at home or in churches and synagogues, many families are joining together in prayer. Consider ideas on what you can do as a family.
- **Look for signs of anxiety and stress in your child:** In times of stress, such as

this one, children and teens may have difficulty with their behavior, concentration and attention. If your child's reaction to this or any other traumatic event continues, contact your pediatrician or family physician for referral to a mental health professional.

It is difficult to try to comprehend such an act of violence, much less, have to explain it to our children. But nonetheless, it is vitally important to talk about it with our children. We must also help them understand there are no right or wrong emotions and that a wide range of reactions is completely normal and expected. We also encourage you to keep the conversation going and continue to provide your children with opportunities to talk about what happened, how they are feeling and what concerns them in the days, weeks and months ahead.

For additional resources on coping with the school shooting, visit:

<http://www.naeyc.org/content/coping-school-shooting>.

**Source: Drug Free Action Alliance – December 2012- [www.drugfreeactionalliance.org](http://www.drugfreeactionalliance.org)**