

Talking to Kids About Fear & Violence

“Parents can help children gain a sense of personal control by talking openly about violence and personal safety.”

Recent acts of violence in have stunned the nation. Children, in particular, may experience anxiety, fear, and a sense of personal risk. They may also sense anxiety and tension in those around them — friends, family members, loved ones, caregivers and other adults who have a direct impact on the well-being of children.

Knowing how to talk with your child about violence will play an important role in easing fear and anxieties about their personal safety in these tenuous times as well as helping them to manage rising concerns. To guide parents through discussions about fear and violence, Mental Health America offers the following suggestions:

- **Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings.** Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school, in their neighborhood, or in public places. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term “violence” but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them. Encourage them to express their feelings through talking, drawing or playing.
- **Validate the child’s feelings.** Do not minimize a child’s concerns. Let him/her know that serious acts of violence are not common, which is why incidents such as these shootings and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks attract so much media attention.
- **Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding violence.** It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone. Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.” Part of keeping discussion open is not being afraid to say you don’t know how to answer a child’s question. When such an occasion arises, explain to your child that these acts of violence are rare, and they cause feelings that even adults have trouble dealing with. Temper this by explaining that, even so, adults will always work very hard to keep children safe and secure.
- **Discuss the safety procedures that are in place** at your child’s school, in your neighborhood, and in other public places. Arrange a presentation by a member of the local police force, or a neighborhood watch captain.
- **Create safety plans with your child.** Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted neighbor or security guard) your child can talk to if they should feel threatened. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.
- **Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about their safety.** Younger children may react to violence by not wanting to attend school or go out in public. Behavior such

as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children, or reappear in children who had previously outgrown them. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

- **Empower children** to take action regarding their safety. Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.
- **Keep the dialogue going** and make safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.
- **Seek help when necessary.** If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact your pediatrician or a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center.

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