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Supporting Children in the Wake of Tragedy  
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The evening news provides us with daily reminders about the tragedies we hope our children will never experience. As we watch and learn about each of these adversities, we often find ourselves attempting to shield children from even the knowledge that such events do occur. Yet, as the debates and disagreements about gun control and community violence wage on, one thing has become perfectly clear: Our children are going to continue to be exposed to information about tragic events, whether or not we try to shield them. Furthermore, when children are not able to receive age-appropriate and accurate information to help them make sense of the information they are bombarded with, they become at greater risk for developing anxiety and other related challenges. While this knowledge may feel incredibly unsettling, there is much we can do to help support our children in the wake of tragedy and to inoculate them against the risks of developing greater challenges in the future.

It is important for children to know that they can look to the adults in their life for information and support when faced with news about violence, natural disaster, or a tragedy that has occurred. Children need reassurance that they are safe and they need help in making sense of the different feelings, questions, and reactions they may be experiencing. Even very young children are able to perceive when the adults in their world are reacting differently due to some event or occurrence, and it is important that the adults help support children in understanding and coping with these changes.

Consider these tips as you prepare yourself for supporting your children in the wake of tragedy:

1. Safety first

Children need to know they are safe. Remind your children of all that is being done in their home, school, and community to help keep everyone safe. This includes reminders that rules and limits are set to help keep us safe. Recount with your children all the parts of your family's daily routine that are intended to keep them safe and healthy. If your children are concerned about what might happen if a disaster were to occur in their world, review safety plans with them, to ensure them the grownups are prepared to help keep them safe in the event of a crisis.

In the wake of serious disaster or tragedy, make efforts, when possible, to limit unnecessary exposure to television, radio, or internet news events that may be over-stimulating or anxiety provoking for your children.

2. Knowledge is power

When children are told “you’re too young to understand,” there is a tendency for children to imagine the worst, which can lead to the development of excessive fears and anxiety. By providing children with simple, accurate, age-appropriate information, we can help answer their questions and address their concerns, while staving off the anxiety that can ensue from lack of information.

3. Honor your feelings

Children and adults alike are often surprised by the myriad of feelings that we experience in the wake of tragedy: Horror, shock, anger, confusion, relief (that it wasn’t here/me/my family), sadness, numbness, fear, anxiety. These feelings can be frightening and overwhelming, especially for a child who has never been faced with these intense emotions. Help your children to make sense of these emotions by fostering the development of a strong “feelings vocabulary.” Identify and name your own feelings to your children, providing a model for appropriate feelings expression. Label your children’s emotions when you see them expressing them through their actions. Let your children know that they are allowed to have all of their feelings and be prepared to help them find healthy ways to express these feelings.

4. Be patient

Just as it is with any form of loss and grief, our reactions to tragedy are not always predictable and they can last longer than we expect. Be patient with yourself and your children as you work to find ways to make sense of what has happened and you adjust to the ever-changing array of feelings you are experiencing.

5. Carry on

Children do best when they know what to expect. Routines help ensure consistency and predictability in a child’s world, which equals a sense of safety and security. Help your children maintain a sense of safety and security by ensuring them that even though something terrible has happened, many things will remain the same. Strive to maintain similar routines and schedules, along with maintaining the same expectations, boundaries, and rules that existed before.

For more information about talking to children about violence, please visit:

[http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/talkingviolence.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/talkingviolence.pdf) or  
<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA12-4732/SMA12-4732.pdf>

Remember, Supporting Kidds is available to help. Please feel free to contact us at 302-235-5544 or [support@supportingkidds.org](mailto:support@supportingkidds.org). We are always happy to provide consultation around specific issues or concerns that a family may have in coping with tragedy, loss, and change.