

BELIEVE IN ZERO[®]

How to Talk with Children in the Aftermath of Violence

TEACHunicef

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When violent events occur, it is a natural inclination to want to protect children from the terrifying details as they unfold in the media. Yet in an age of pervasive communications technology, it is impossible to shield children – especially once they reach school age – from unpleasant world events. There are ways, however, that we as educators and family members can help youth to cope with and make sense of tragedy in the world around them. Following are some brief suggestions.

- **Validate Feelings:** Allow children to express their feelings and let them know it's natural to feel sadness, anger, fear and other emotions in response to violence and injustice. Give children skills for coping with their emotions and reassure them that they are safe in their own home, school, or community.
- **Listen First:** Ask children what they know about the situation rather than making assumptions about their level of understanding. Invite them to ask questions, then listen openly and take their questions seriously.
- **Respond Honestly:** Respond to children based on their questions and what they tell you they want to know. Consider age appropriateness in formulating your response, and be calm, clear, concrete, and direct. Don't hesitate to let children know that you don't have the answers to some of their questions, and use this as an opportunity to look for answers together. It's also okay to let children know that some questions have no good answers – when senseless violence occurs or when people do bad things, it is confounding and scary for adults as well as children.
- **Encourage Non-Violence:** Emphasize that violence is never a solution, and that revenge and retaliation are not constructive emotions. Talk with young people about non-violent alternatives for responding to violence, and ways to solve problems peacefully.
- **Avoid Violent Imagery:** Don't dwell on the violent incident itself and steer clear of repetitive violent images in the media. Instead, direct children toward stories and images that depict the outpouring of love and support from the vast majority of people around the world.
- **Limit Media Consumption:** Similarly, limit media exposure so that children are not overly bombarded with disturbing information and images. When children are exposed to media, try to watch/listen with them to help make sense of complex and disparate messages, and to build their media literacy and critical thinking abilities.
- **Focus on What's Important:** Rather than dwelling on the sensational aspects of the story, teach children about the underlying issues in ways that help them understand the world in a deeper and more nuanced way.
- **Counter Bias and Hate:** Take care not to perpetuate stereotypes when discussing events that involve different cultural or religious groups from other parts of the world. Point out bias when it surfaces in media reports, and give children the skills to respond

to bigotry in informed ways. Emphasize that prejudice and discrimination are wrong and discuss ways to act against it.

- **Watch for Warning Signs:** Be aware of signals that a child is distressed by violent events, especially those children who have experienced prior traumatic episodes. If a child exhibits difficulty sleeping or eating, fear of school/regular activities, inability to separate from family members, withdrawn behavior, or other problematic conduct, seek the guidance of a doctor or mental health professional.

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