

Donate to MHA

Menu

Search

Share this page | [Print] [Facebook] [Twitter] [Email]

Talking To Kids About Fear And Violence

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

Acts of violence in schools and other public places 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 of a classmate who is mean to them or about something they heard on TV (or saw online). 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 as common or likely as they may seem, despite 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 a 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 acts of violence can’t always be explained and 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 McGruff the Crime Dog, 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, or weapons) 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. Find your local [MHA Affiliate here](#).

Additional Resources

- SAMHSA’s [Coping With Grief After Community Violence](#) offers information on common distress reactions following community violence + resources for coping, including for parents and caregivers of children & youth.
- The Child Development Institute has additional information about [How to Talk to Kids about Tragedies in the Media](#).



In Crisis?

Call 1-800-273-TALK
OR
Text MHA to 741741



Find MHA in Your Area



Join Our Mailing List



Mind Your Health

Screen for 9 common conditions. [GO >](#)

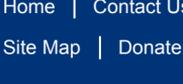


Help Support MHA

Donate or set up a recurring gift. [GIVE >](#)



Share & Learn what #mentalillnessfeelslike



500 Montgomery Street, Suite 820
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone (703) 684-7722

Toll Free (800) 969-6642

Fax (703) 684-6968

Web Sponsor



Google translate

Select Language

Home | Contact Us | Store | Career Center | Site Policies |

Site Map | Donate | Affiliate Login

SEO Provided by Pikes Peak SEO

© Copyright 2019 | Mental Health America | Formerly known as the National Mental Health Association. MHA permits electronic copying and sharing of all portions of its public website and requests in return only the customary copyright acknowledgement, using "© Copyright Mental Health America" and the date of the download.

The links on this page may contain document data that requires additional software to open:

Adobe Reader is required to download PDF documents.