



How to Speak With Children About Tragedy

The tragic events of December 14 in Newtown, CT have touched all of us. Our hearts go out to the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School who have lost so much through this senseless act and for all the children in the school who suffered through this extremely frightening experience.

The Pennsbury School District Counseling Staff will be available to help students who may be negatively affected by the ongoing news coverage of this incident, or who have difficulty processing the reality of that horrific day. Parents and school staff are encouraged to carefully monitor the children over the next few days to ensure that they are cared for appropriately, without overly reacting or drawing undue attention to the details of the situation. Overreaction could actually create more serious problems for some.

Please encourage your child to notify an adult if he or she is feeling frightened, deeply sad or overly concerned about his or her safety. It is important to reassure children that the adults in their lives are doing everything they can to make their school, home, and neighborhood safe for them.

The **National Mental Health Association** is a good source for helping a child cope with tragic news such as the school shooting in Newtown, CT. Parents need to make their own decisions about what is most appropriate for their particular child(ren). Parents should not dwell on the issues, but should be aware of a child's feelings about such incidents.

Here are some suggestions from the National Mental Health Association:

Validate the child's feelings.

Do not minimize a child's concerns. Let him/her know that serious school violence is not common, which is why these incidents attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.

Empower children to take action regarding school 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.

Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school.

Explain why visitors sign in at the principal's office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.

Create safety plans with your child.

Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher, or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that he or she can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school.

Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

Seek help when necessary.

If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center.