

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN FOLLOWING A SCHOOL THREAT

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Scenes of violence and threats have been increasingly playing out on school campuses across the country, including the recent mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Recent statistics from the [Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School](#) showed that 2021 had the highest level of school shooting incidents and that five months into 2022, there have been 136 non-active shooter incidents and two active-shooter incidents.

In the aftermath of a shooting or threats, teens say they are very worried about school shootings, and parents share that concern, according to a [Pew Research Center Survey](#).

When it comes to what can be done to help children manage fear, anxiety, and stress following a threat or an incident, CJ Powers, PhD, clinical psychologist at [Huntsman Mental Health Institute](#), shares helpful tips for parents and caregivers.

"Before talking to their children, parents should try to check in with themselves first and address their own stress and anxiety," Powers says. "Children and teens may not have a clear understanding of the level of danger and will be influenced by an adult's negative emotions."

He also recommends talking to your child and asking how much they know about the incident. "Start by asking if they are aware of the issue and what they think about it, so you can address what they know and have them guide the conversation."

## How to Start the Conversation

For a productive conversation, Powers recommends the following:

- Ask how they are feeling. If they report anxiety or other distress related to the threats, listen and try to understand where they are coming from. Try to validate that it is normal to be anxious when you are worried for your or your friends' safety.
- Provide information to help put their fears in an accurate context. Talk to them about safety protocols that are in place, the adults and law enforcement that monitor threats to keep students safe, and the role social media has played (most social media threats are hoaxes).
- Leave the door open for future conversations and follow up. This is particularly important if another school threat or incident occurs.

Powers also recommends limiting exposure to news and social media.

"Young children are prone to misunderstanding the news and information they see on social media," Powers says. Children may think past events that are discussed are reoccurring, or they may misunderstand reports of threats as actual events that happened or are happening. "It can be true for older children as well. Their worry may drive them to over-consume the news, leading to a prolonging of distress and making feelings more intense."

## Monitor Social Media Use

Powers warns that social media can reinforce fears or anxiety over and over again because children and teens will see multiple posts about the same topic. "You also see risk-sharing and reading incorrect information that gets spread quickly through social media," he says. "It's best to carefully monitor your children's accounts. Ask them about what they are reading and sharing on social media, set up their accounts so that you have to approve app downloads, and encourage them to talk to you if they see something that causes fear or anxiety."

Seek professional help if anxiety persists.

"While children are very resilient and most children are unlikely to experience lasting harm from scary and even traumatic events, some children could experience anxiety that persists and may begin to impair their functioning," Powers warns. "It is also not possible to predict who will be affected by

exposure or perceived exposure to a trauma—otherwise perfectly healthy individuals can be taken by surprise when thoughts and worries just won't go away. Having intrusive and upsetting thoughts after exposure to a traumatic event is not a sign of weakness. It can happen to anybody."

Even if a child does not witness a gun being brought to school, learning about threats or events that occurred elsewhere can still be experienced as traumatic for some individuals.

Signs to watch for include:

- changes in mood (increases in anxiety, irritability, or sadness)
- withdrawing from relationships
- being unusually clingy, refusing to attend school, and/or difficulty concentrating
- intrusive and reoccurring worries, nightmares, etc.
- somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, restlessness, etc.)

If these changes persist for more than a few days, seeking the support of a therapist is encouraged.



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