How to Talk to the Children and Teens in Your Life About the Newtown, CT Tragedy

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Once again we are faced with the traumatic, violent deaths of a group of innocent people, this time precious children in Newtown, Connecticut. I have been asked to provide some guidelines on how to communicate with children and teens about this tragedy. If you know of others who might benefit from this information, I invite you to forward this article to them.

First, it's important to remember that children can cope with what they know, but they can't cope with a reality they are over-protected from. As a father and as a counselor, I understand the instinct to want to protect children from such tragic news. But the reality is that many if not most of the children and teens in our lives (with the exception of the very youngest) have already heard about the recent school shooting from their peers, social media, or television. They have been exposed to the fact that 20 first-graders were shot by a stranger who barged into an elementary school. Many of them have also seen photos of the killer and of the children and teachers who were killed. Some may have read the horrific details of the massacre.

The point is, we cannot protect children from the tragedy, but we can let them teach us how they feel about it. As the caring adults in their lives, we have the responsibility to be available to them when they are struggling to understand what happened or if they have fears that the same thing could happen in their schools. We also have the responsibility to be honest with them within the boundaries of what is developmentally appropriate for a given child.

Listen (and observe), then respond

Watch the children in your life a little more closely this week and in the weeks to come. Notice if they are listening to news of the shooting, reading news online or in print, sharing stories that other kids have told them at school, or asking questions about the shooting. If it's on their mind, or if you think it might be, then it's your turn to ask a couple open-ended questions. "What have you heard about the school shooting that happened last week?" "Are the kids or teachers at your school talking about the kids who died in Connecticut?" You can also share your feelings: "I've been feeling sad about the children who were killed last week."

Also watch for a change in behavior. Children who are more irritable or aggressive than usual or who are complaining of physical ailments uncharacteristically may essentially

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be telling you that they have absorbed some of the nation's horror and anxiety about what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary.

When ignored, children and teens feel all alone on their grief. Respond to them with sensitivity and warmth. Use a caring tone of voice; maintain eye contact when talking with and learning from them. This commitment to actively listening tells children that their feelings will be respected.

Remember that often kids don't want to have a long conversation about the tragedy. They don't want to be "talked at." But if they're given the opportunity, many will tell you what's on their mind, allowing you a glimpse into their reality. Respond based on what they tell you or show you through their behaviors. Use their words and level of understanding. Don't over-explain. Keep it simple and honest and loving. Let them know you're someone they can talk to about the tough things.

Also, some kids, especially younger ones, may truly not be concerned about the shooting because it seems like just another far-away story that doesn't affect them. That's why it's important to listen and observe, then respond. Allow for a discussion but don't insist on one if the child isn't telling or showing you she's sad, anxious or perplexed. Let the child lead.

Safety first

If a child is expressing, verbally or behaviorally, that she is afraid, reassure her that you and the other grown-ups in her life are doing everything you can to make sure that she is safe. Because it's true, it's OK to say, "This kind of thing almost never happens. It's a one-in-a-million situation. You're protected."

Teens are ready to handle the more nuanced truth, which is that safety can't be 100 percent guaranteed in anything we do in life. Model living each day with boldness, resilience, meaning, and purpose for the teens in your life.

Many kids will find it helpful to review school safety and security procedures, and indeed, this is happening at schools across the country as I write this. Physically show them the security measures in place and step through the drills.

In the home, if a child seems to be regressing to the behaviors of younger kids—such as wanting to sleep with mom and dad, bedwetting, thumb-sucking, etc., these are signs that this child simply needs some extra attention right now. Don't punish him for the regressive behaviors. Indulge them for now. And spend extra time with him in the coming days and weeks. Be available when he gets up, when he comes home from school, after dinner, and on weekends as much as you can.

Be the grown-up

We as a nation have been traumatized by the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. The multiple, violent deaths of precious young children and the adults who cared for them

can result in intense feelings of shock, fear, anxiety and helplessness. Some of us confront these feelings by obsessively watching TV coverage of the event or talking about it with anyone and everyone.

While it's normal and natural for us to try to integrate the reality of what happened in these ways, this kind of exposure may be too much for children. So limit your media viewing and conversation about the tragedy in front of your children. Younger kids, especially, don't need to know and aren't developmentally mature enough yet to handle all the details.

Be calm, reassuring, and positive. Be the caregiver. If you need to talk about your own thoughts and feelings about what happened, find another adult to talk to out of earshot of the kids. Never lie to children or hide the truth from them, but do limit their exposure.

Older kids, especially teens, may, like many adults, work through their thoughts and feelings by engaging with the national media and conversation about the shooting. Try watching the news together with these teens and talking about what you see. Be careful not to reverse roles. Don't display your own grief so much that the child is forced to take care of you instead of the other way around. Seek outside support for yourself if you need it.

Search for meaning...together

As we all struggle to understand what can never be understood, we naturally turn to rituals and faith. If you attend a place of worship and there is a message about the shooting during the service, this may be helpful for your older child to hear. Model prayer, meditation, singing, spending time in nature or whichever activities are helpful to you in connecting to your spirituality. Attending a service or candle-lighting in memory of the children who died may be helpful for your family.

Participating in activities that connect us as humans can also be meaningful at this time. Children of all ages can participate in activities like making cards to send to the surviving children at Sandy Hook Elementary or supporting children in need in your own community through volunteer efforts like food or toy drives.

If a child wants to talk about where the children who died "went," be honest with her about your beliefs and ask her about hers. Encourage this conversation without feeling you need to know all the answers.

Thank you for being an adult who is committed to helping children learn to navigate our challenging times and emerge as resilient, communicative, and compassionate adults themselves. The world needs more communicators and compassion-givers. Perhaps if we work on these learned skills together, one day we will have no more need of articles like this one.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. A father of three, Dr. Wolfelt has written many bestselling books for and about grieving children and teens, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids*, *Healing A Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends, and Caregivers*, and *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens.* Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about helping children in grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.