

Dear Parents,

2-15-18

After the tragic news of another school shooting, I wanted to let you know that it did not come up with any of the students in the K-5 classes. As I believe that parents are the first responders to this type of tragedy, it was not discussed by any school member with your child. That said, CIS is committed to supporting both the students and their families, and should the need arise, I would be available to meet with a student, their families or both. I do think one of the key concerns is providing age-appropriate information.

I hope this information can support you as a guide. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have other questions, suggestions or concerns.

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I have gathered some suggestions put out by the National School Psychologists Association, American School Counseling Association, the American Psychological Association, and even Mister Rogers that may guide your discussions with your children, should the need arise:

Helping Children Talk About Their Scary Feelings: PBS Parents:

During troubling times, we'd like to offer some thoughts that may be of help to you and the children in your care. Talking about our fears can often help make them less frightening. Our mission has always been to help families grow in healthy, nurturing ways, and we hope our messages can be of service to you.

- When children mention something frightening, find out what they know about it. (Their fantasies are often very different from the actual truth!) Listening carefully and respecting their concerns can assure them that they can talk about anything with you.
- Somewhere deep inside each one of us human beings is a longing to know that all will be well. Our children need to hear from us adults that we will do everything we can to keep them safe and to help them grow in this world.
- When Fred Rogers was a boy and would see scary things on the news, his mother would say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."
- You parents and caregivers are of prime importance in your child's life -- what you do, think and say are powerful influences on the children in your care. By helping them find healthy ways of dealing with their feelings -- ways that don't hurt them or anyone else, you're helping to make our world a better, safer place.

Helping Kids During Crisis (School Counselors Association)

- Try and keep routines as normal as possible. Kids gain security from the predictability of routine, including attending school.

- Limit exposure to television and the news.
- Be honest with kids and share with them as much information as they are developmentally able to handle.
- Listen to kids' fears and concerns.
- Reassure kids that the world is a good place to be, but that there are people who do bad things.
- Parents and adults need to first deal with and assess their own responses to crisis and stress.
- Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships.

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers (NASP)

High profile acts of violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears.

Reassure children that they are safe. Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

Make time to talk. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.

- **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe

and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

- **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
- **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

Review safety procedures. This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

Observe children's emotional state. Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

Limit television viewing of these events. Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

Maintain a normal routine. Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to

keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Schools are safe places. School staff works with parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures). We all play a role in the school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting, tattling or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the **possibility** of something happening and **probability** that it will affect you (our school community).
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control. NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

In the aftermath of a shooting

Help your children manage distress



As a parent, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children about a shooting rampage. It is important to remember that children look to their parents to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what age your children are, be they toddlers, adolescents or even young adults.

Consider the following tips for helping your children manage their distress.

Talk with your child. Talking to your children about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them.

What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there listening to them.

- Find times when they are most likely to talk: such as when riding in the car, before dinner or at bedtime.
- Start the conversation. Let them know you are interested in them and how they are coping with the information they are getting.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view. Don't interrupt — allow them to express their ideas and understanding before you respond.

- Express your own opinions and ideas without putting down theirs. Acknowledge that it is okay to disagree.
- Remind them you are there for them to provide safety, comfort and support. Give them a hug.

Keep home a safe place. Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the solitude or comfort they need. Plan a night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity. Watch for signs of stress, fear or anxiety. After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work or changes in appetite. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear in a few months. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.

Take "news breaks." Your children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the Internet, television or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also, scheduling some breaks for yourself is important; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy.

Take care of yourself. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.

These tips and strategies can help you guide your children through the current crisis. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, you may want to consider talking to someone who could help. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to [get professional help](#) if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. Thanks to psychologists Ronald S. Palomares, PhD, and Lynn F. Bufka, PhD. who assisted us with this article.