

Talking to Children About Tragic Events

Adults sometimes struggle with how to talk with children following tragic events, such as natural disasters, plane crashes, and school shootings. Below are some guidelines to help in these difficult situations:

1. Children gauge their reactions based on how the adults around them respond to a situation.

We naturally feel vulnerable and emotional when exposed to a tragic event. However, children may not understand the intensity of our emotion and they can become scared. We can demonstrate to children that expressing our emotions is normal while not overwhelming them with our reactions. They should see we feel terrible about the event, but that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Showing extreme fear and/or agitation will not help children. Talk to a trusted friend or other adult about your feelings.

2. Limit media exposure.

As much as we want to keep abreast of news in time of crisis, constant exposure to news reports and the disturbing images does not help children or adults feel safe. Children may not have a concept that something is far away and may think it is happening close by since the TV is in the room. Some children (and some adults) may have difficulty getting graphic scenes and images out of their minds.

4. Talk to your children honestly about the events.

Start by asking your child what they know. This way you can immediately dispel anything that is not true. Even if you are not watching media coverage at home or talking about, children will hear classmates and friends discussing events. It is best to be proactive and start the discussion. They may be worrying in silence and be nervous about mentioning the event or asking questions. Answer questions honestly, but on an age appropriate level. Young children do not need to know details. Reassure children that you will be there to keep them safe.

5. Focus on the people helping.

These events offer a time not to just focus on the bad in the world, but to focus on the good and all the people who care for others. Fred Rogers said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for



Helping children



together

the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world." Let your child know if you are making a donation or doing something else to help after a tragedy. Children may want to help as well.