

## 8 tips for talking to parents and children about school shootings

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### Disclosure

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In the aftermath of a school shooting, parents and teachers may seek a psychiatrist's advice on how to best discuss these incidents with children. We offer guidelines on what to tell concerned parents, educators, and other adults who may interact with children affected by a school shooting.

### 6 tips for interacting with children

**1. Talk about the event.** Instruct adults to ask children to share their feelings about the incident and to show genuine interest in listening to the child's thoughts and point of view. Adults shouldn't pretend the event hasn't occurred or isn't serious. Children may be more worried if they think adults are too afraid to tell them what is happening. It is important to gently correct any misinformation older students may have received via social media.<sup>1</sup>

**2. Reinforce that home is a safe haven.** Overwhelming emotions and uncertainty can bring about a sense of insecurity in children. Children may come home seeking a safe environment. Advise parents to plan a night where family members participate in a favorite family activity.<sup>1</sup> Tell parents to remind their children that trustworthy adults—parents, emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, and the military—are helping provide safety, comfort, and support.<sup>2</sup>

**3. Limit television time.** If children are exposed to the news, parents should watch it with them briefly, but avoid letting children rewatch the same event repetitively. Constant exposure to the event may heighten a child's anxiety and fears.

**4. Maintain a normal routine.** Tell parents they should maintain, as best they can, their normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, and bedtime, but to remain flexible.<sup>2</sup> Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep. Advise parents to spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with their children, particularly at bedtime. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a feeling of normalcy.

**5. Encourage emotions.** Instruct parents to explain to their children that all feelings are okay and normal, and to let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective.<sup>1</sup> Children may need help in expressing these feelings, so be patient. If an incident happened at the child's school, teachers and administrators may conduct group sessions to help children express their concerns about being back in school.

**6. Seek creativity or spirituality.** Encourage parents and other adults to provide a creative outlet for children, such as making get well cards or sending letters to the survivors and their families. Writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, firefighters, and police officers also may be comforting.<sup>1,2</sup> Suggest that parents encourage their children to pray or think hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families.

### 2 tips for interacting with adults

**7. Recommend they take care of themselves.** Explain to adult caregivers that because children learn by observing, they shouldn't ignore their own feelings of anx-



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ity, grief, and anger. By expressing their emotions in a productive manner, adults will be better able to support their children. Encourage adults to talk to friends, family, religious leaders, or mental health counselors.

**8. Advise adults to be alert for children who may need professional help.** Tell them to be vigilant when monitoring a child's emotional state. Children who may benefit from mental health counseling after a tragedy may exhibit warning signs, such as changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns, which may indicate the child is experiencing grief, anxiety, or discomfort.

Remind adults to be aware of children who are at greater risk for mental health

issues, including those who are already struggling with other recent traumatic experiences—past traumatic experiences, personal loss, depression, or other mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Be particularly observant for children who may be at risk of suicide.<sup>1,2</sup> Professional counseling may be needed for a child who is experiencing an emotional reaction that lasts >1 month and is impacting his or her daily functioning.<sup>1</sup>

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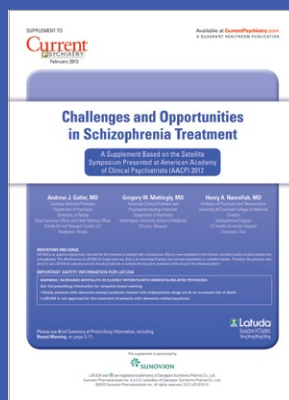
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**Parents should reinforce that home is a safe haven for children and encourage them to express their emotions**

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