

Magness: How to talk to children about tragedy

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Parents often come to me asking how to talk to their children following a tragedy like the fatal shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., or the bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon.

These things are hard for most adults to understand, so it makes sense that children also are confused.

There is no one right way to talk to children about such tragedies, but there are some tips you can follow to minimize their fear. The acronym BRAVES can help you remember what to say:

- **BE HONEST**, but be brief. It's OK to say that something bad happened. It's OK to say that people got hurt, and it's OK to say you aren't sure who did it. If it happened far away, it's OK to say that, too. Giving children too many details feels overwhelming. Think about what you want to say, and then say half of that. Wait for your child to ask questions, and then answer those briefly, too.
- **REASSURE** them they are safe. Let your child know that he or she is safe, and remind them of caretakers who help keep them safe. They may have questions about what would happen if a trauma occurred in their city. You don't have to create an elaborate safety plan, but tell them all the people who they could call in an emergency, and what plans their school or daycare has in place for emergencies.
- **ACKNOWLEDGE** it. Children are perceptive and they can pick up on stresses even when they don't know what's going on. If pupils at school or adults at home are talking about something serious, children will try to understand what's happening. If we deny them any information at all, they will usually create an idea of something they think it may be by piecing together ideas or phrases they've heard. This is sometimes worse than the truth. Acknowledging that something happened, and having the chance to talk about it, can reduce anxiety and help children feel a sense of control.

- **VALIDATE** feelings. It's normal for you to feel overwhelmed, or scared, or confused following a tragedy, and those same feelings are normal for your child. Let them know that any way they feel about it is OK, and that many people have similar feelings about it.
- **EXPRESS** yourself. If it's true, let your child know that this is scary for you, too. Let them know that it's OK to talk about it or ask questions about it. If you don't know the answers, say so. Let your child know that they can also talk to their teacher or school counselor about their feelings.
- **SHUT OFF** the TV. The media is great at keeping us informed, but the creation of 24-hour cable news channels introduced us to repeated stories and images of current news. Those can often be accompanied by graphic images or reports or even speculation about what happened. Children may subconsciously create a highlight reel of the trauma that will continue to play in their heads long past the commercial breaks. Minimizing their exposure to TV reduces the likelihood they'll see or hear more than they should.

If your child experiences severe reactions to the news of the trauma, or if their reactions are lasting longer than a few weeks, you may want your child to see a professional. The 411 referral hotline offers referrals to hundreds of local agencies, so dial 411 for more information about where to start.

- Leigh Ellen Magness is a licensed clinical social worker and registered play therapist in Athens.