

How to Talk to Kids About School Shootings

 childmind.org/article/anxiety-school-shooting

Strategies for dealing with anxiety — your kids' and your own

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Anxiety over school shootings has become a common fear in America. When something that once seemed unthinkable happens with some regularity, added to our feeling of horror that it's happened (again!) is another kind of alarm: Could this happen at my child's school?

And many parents have begun to worry whether the news of school shootings, along with the active-shooter drills most schools are now conducting, are frightening children in a damaging way.

Responding to this concern, Jamie Howard, PhD, director of the Trauma and Resilience Service at the Child Mind Institute, says that parents tend to worry about school shootings more than their children do. "Even though they're the ones going into school every day, I just don't hear a lot of kids worrying about it," she says. "When children are younger they're more egocentric. As they get to become teenagers this changes." This *developmental*

selfishness is a quality that often protects younger children from the kind of anxiety that the adults around them are experiencing.

This is good news for parents who worry about their children feeling afraid. But kids are very good at picking up on the fears of their parents, and if they sense that Mom or Dad is afraid, they will take notice.

Unhealthy anxiety

Psychologists sometimes describe anxiety as the body's internal alarm system. You want your alarm system to go off if there is a threat nearby. But sometimes the alarm is triggered too easily and you are alerted when there isn't any danger at all. Or maybe there is a threat, but it doesn't actually warrant a full-fledged alarm response.

The way school shootings are covered on television and discussed on social media is intense. We can hear about the tragedy throughout our day, often for several days, whenever we look at a screen. Besides making us feel upset and frustrated, it can also make us feel less safe. “Because it’s so horrific and scary and important it dominates the media and therefore our minds, and we think of it as a much bigger threat than it is, explains Dr. Howard. “The more you watch, the more it tricks your mind into thinking it’s an increased probability of occurring.”

School shootings actually are not very common, so while they are a threat, the likelihood that one will personally affect you is slim. In Dr. Howard’s words, “some anxiety is warranted, debilitating anxiety is not.” If you feel that you are more anxious than you should be, a good first step is always to take a break from any media that might be focusing your attention in an unhealthy direction.

Look for ways to be proactive

Because anxiety is meant to prepare us for action, it makes sense to channel the worries you are feeling into something proactive you can do. One of the things Dr. Howard recommends is forming a parent group at the school. Assessing what the school needs, getting involved in the planning process for drills, and having ongoing conversations about keeping the school safe can make worried parents feel better.

Likewise, participating in political activism or efforts to support mental health and wellness in your community can make you feel like you are making a difference. It also sets a good example for your children, who may want to get involved, too. Many of the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School began lobbying lawmakers after the tragic shooting at their school, and they inspired students across the country to think about ways they might make their own voices heard. Participating in a school walkout or even just getting their opinion across in a conversation with a parent can make kids feel like their thoughts and values matter, which will feel reassuring.

Talk to your children

Parents are sometimes afraid to bring up school shootings with their children, because they don’t want to scare them. But children will have often heard about a school shooting that is getting a lot of attention in the media, and bringing it up can actually alleviate any anxiety they might be feeling. Avoiding potentially scary topics can make them scarier to children.

These discussions are a chance for you to answer questions that they might have and provide some reassurance. While you can’t promise that their school will never have a shooting, you can in good faith tell them that school shootings are actually very rare and remind them that they practice drills at school to keep them safe.

If you aren't sure what to say, you can always ask your kids if they have any questions. Use common sense about how much detail to go into, and try not to use euphemisms or fuzzy language, which can make a young child's imagination run wild.

You can also take this opportunity to share important messages that you want to communicate. For example, Dr. Howard suggests saying, "If a classmate of yours is struggling, we don't do nothing. We don't gossip about them. We tell a grownup so they can get help." Or if your child is a teenager, and another student says or writes something scary, the same advice holds: they should let an adult know.

Active shooter drills

Most schools today practice active shooter drills. The goal of these drills should never be to scare children. Just as we don't use fake smoke in fire drills, schools don't need to use fake guns during active shooter drills. Schools who try to make the drills as realistic as possible risk scaring students (and teachers), and miss the point of these drills in the first place.

Schools have active shooter drills to get everyone used to their safety plan. "The more you practice something, the more you rehearse it, you lay the mental tracks so that you decrease the tendency to freeze in the case of a real emergency and you can go quickly into action," explains Dr. Howard. "In the military you do realistic drills because you really will be in combat, but this is a low-probability event. You just need to lay the tracks so you decrease those few seconds of reaction time."

When teachers (and parents) talk about the drills, they should do it with a lot of confidence. They should make it clear that school shootings, just like fires, are unlikely, but, says Dr. Howard, "We are going to be ready if it happens. This is what we're going to do to stay safe."