

Talking to Your Child About Gun Violence at School



A child's safety is the top priority for every caregiver. The news of a school shooting can trigger strong feelings in both adults and children. Even if your child hasn't heard about gun violence on the news or through people talking about it, schools now hold drills to prepare for the possibility of an active shooter. All of this can be scary for a child. It may also lead to them asking questions.

If it's hard for you to talk about this subject, that's natural. It's a difficult topic. With these tips, you can open a line of communication with your child. This will allow them to feel heard and express their fears.

Tips for listening and sharing

Your child may come right out and ask you questions about gun violence. While it may catch you off guard, this is a chance to let them express their feelings.

Some children may not feel comfortable talking about it. They may need a prompt. If you know that they've recently had a safety drill, you can ask them about it. Or simply start with the question, "Do you feel safe at school?"

The discussion you have should be based on your child's age and comprehension level:

- If you have a young child, you may want to stay away from more difficult terms and ideas. Instead, focus on the concept of hurting someone, and how important it is to follow instructions in an emergency.
- Older children or teens may brush off their feelings outwardly. But they may still be dealing with them inside.

Once you're ready to have the conversation, consider these ideas to move forward:

- Let them talk openly without interruption.
- Listen to what they say.
- Ask questions if they're reluctant to talk.
- Support them by explaining that it's normal to have these feelings. Try not to minimize what they're worried about. Do not say things like, "That's silly" or "Don't worry about that."
- Share your own feelings. Let them know that they are not alone in dealing with this.
- Talk honestly without unnecessarily alarming them. Keep in mind that they don't have the same experience or context that you do. This may be their first time thinking about it.

Safety measures

If it was a safety drill at your child's school that started the conversation, point out that the reason schools do these drills is to be prepared. While it may seem scary in the moment, they're actually practicing something that will help them in an emergency. That's why it's important to follow along and listen to instructions. But make it clear that having a drill doesn't mean that this is going to happen at their school. It's about knowing what to do just in case.

If your child didn't take part in a safety drill, research what procedures your school has in place and discuss them together. These might include:

- Having active shooter, shelter-in-place, or lockdown drills
- Requesting guests sign in before entering the school building

- Preventing any guests at all during school hours
- Locking certain doors during the school day
- Checking school bags or lockers after a threat

Once you have discussed what the school's procedures are, you can make a safety plan with your child. This might include:

- Identifying a trusted adult at school to talk with.
- Finding out where to report suspicious behavior or any other threats.
- Making sure your child knows how to reach you (or an emergency contact) if needed. Have them memorize a direct phone number or write it down to keep in a safe spot. This way they can get to it in a hurry.
- Explaining that if they can't follow the school procedures for some reason or are separated from the group, they should do what they can to get to a safe place. It's OK to run or hide in an active shooter emergency as a last resort.
- Knowing what to do if they get separated from their class or the school. This may mean going to someone's house or a local store. Then they can use a phone to call for help. They can also stay out of harm's way.

Coping strategies

Even with open discussions, the idea of not feeling safe at school can lead to stress and anxiety. Take note of changes in your child's behavior after talking about the idea of gun violence at school. They may become reluctant to go to school or join in school activities. This can also lead to acting out in class or lower grades. Or they may feel overwhelmed by emotion for the actual victims of gun violence.

In these instances, it's important to keep the dialogue going. You may keep having this conversation many times over the years, especially as your child gets older. If your child has problems focusing because of stress or grief, there are coping methods that may help. These include:

- Doing breathing exercises
- Using a stress ball or fidget spinner
- Focusing on 1 positive thing every day
- Staying away from triggering content
- Supporting causes for gun violence victims

If these issues last or get worse, you should reach out for professional help. Tell your child that everyone needs help sometimes, and they shouldn't be embarrassed if they do.

There isn't a perfect answer to all of these complex issues. But talking about them in an honest way allows children to express their fears. This is an important first step in helping them feel more secure.

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