Riverside Trauma Center

Talking with your Children About Highly Stressful Events

Explain in an age appropriate manner: Hopefully parents/ guardians will be the first to talk with children about a community event that may affect your child. Try to explain in simple, clear terms what happened, using words and concepts he or she is likely to understand. Example: "we learned today that (name) may have done something that is against the law, and has been arrested".

Listen to your children: Ask what they have heard about the event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions at an age appropriate level. Don't assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be during an activity, such as drawing or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. For example a child may see a school shooting on television and assume it happened in their neighborhood, not many miles away. Also, it is not uncommon for young children to repeat what they saw or heard over and over again to help them process what happened. Be truthful but don't tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the stressful event, be clear that you will always do your best to keep them safe. Let them know adults are working hard to make sure they will stay safe. School age children may be assured to know that a person responsible for a violent crime has been arrested and does not present a danger to your child or his/her school. If the person charged with a crime is someone known to the child, it may be confusing- that someone they know and may have trusted is said to have done something wrong. Expect children to have mixed feelings, possibly deny or react with anger or they may continue to have positive feelings about the person.

Pay attention to your own reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the highly stressful event your children will be more easily reassured. It's OK to let children know that you are upset/ concerned/ angry too- but be sure to show them how you can remain calm even if you are upset.

Monitor access to media: It will help if young children do not watch news reports or see the front page of the newspaper. Young children who see a traumatic event on the news may think the event is ongoing or happening again.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior that they are still struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, sleep problems, wanting to sleep in your bed or bed wetting. They may feel guilty that they were somehow to blame for what happened, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible. Ask your older children what they are seeing/ hearing on social media such as Facebook.

Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities: mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc. reduce anxiety and help children feel more in control by allowing them to know what to expect.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and don't assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: For older children this event may lead to a discussion about ways they can help others who have experienced a difficult time. You can also ask them if they know how to keep themselves safe when they are away from home. Highly stressful events make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activity we can engage in that makes us feel in control, helps us to feel less vulnerable. If you are worried about how your child is reacting, speak with a school counselor or mental health professional.

Riverside Community Care
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