

Talking with Your Children About Traumatic Events

When children witness or hear about traumatic events, it can be difficult to know how to talk to them. These tips can help guide supportive, age-appropriate conversations.

Listen to your children: Ask your children what they have heard about the traumatic event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and do not assume what they might know, or how they may feel. The easiest way to have this conversation might be while they are engaged in an activity: drawing, sitting on a swing, or driving with you in the car. Answer their questions honestly but keep it age appropriate, sharing only the details that they can understand and process.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the traumatic event, be clear that you will keep them safe and let them know adults (school, police, etc.) are working hard to make sure they will stay safe.

Pay attention to your reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the traumatic event, your children will be more easily reassured.

Monitor your child's access to media: Avoid letting young children view distressing news reports or images. They may misinterpret repeated footage as ongoing danger.

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, insomnia, or bedwetting. Children may feel guilty or responsible. It is important to let them know it's not their fault and validate their feelings.

Maintain your routines: Stick to your daily structure of activities—mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc.— Predictability helps children feel safe and grounded.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns at any time, even weeks later. Reassure them that all their and feelings, including their fears are normal and you will always make time to talk.. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: With older children, traumatic events can lead to discussions about helping others, understanding community safety, and learning coping skills. Empower them with knowledge and actions that build resilience. Traumatic events may make us feel like we have lost control and engaging in activities can help us feel less vulnerable.