

Ask the Pediatrician: How do I explain shootings and other disturbing news to my children?

3 May 2021, by Dr. David J. Schonfeld, American Academy Of Pediatrics



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Q: How do I talk to my children about shootings and all the other violent acts in the news lately?

A: After any major act of violence that dominates the news, families struggle with what they should say to children to help them cope with the information.

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents, teachers, child care providers and others who work closely with children to present information in a way that children can understand, adjust to and cope with.

No matter what age or developmental stage children are, parents can start by asking what they've already heard. Most children will have heard something, no matter how old they are. After you ask them what they've heard, share with them basic information, ask what questions they have and how they feel about the situation. Remember that children may have very different worries and concerns than adults, so find out what bothers them first before offering reassurance.

Older children, teens and [young adults](#) might ask more questions and may request and benefit more from additional information. But no matter what age the child is, it's best to keep the dialogue straightforward and direct.

In general, it is best to share basic information with children, not graphic details. Keep young children away from repetitive or graphic images.

With [older children](#), if they are going to watch the news, consider watching it together, recorded rather than live. That allows you to preview it and evaluate its contents before you sit down with them to watch it. Then, as you watch it with them, you can pause and have a discussion.

Many children have access to the news and graphic images through social media and the internet right from their smartphones. You need to be aware of what's out there and take steps in advance to talk to children about what they might hear or see.

It's also important to ensure you aren't being too vague. Simply saying, "Something happened in a faraway town and some people got hurt," doesn't tell children enough about what happened and whether they need to be concerned about this happening to them or their family.

Children may not understand why this is so different from people getting hurt every day and why so much is being said about it. The underlying message for a parent to convey is, "It's OK if these things bother you. We are here to support each other."

Parents who have a child with a [developmental delay](#) or disability should gear their responses to their child's developmental level or abilities, rather

than their physical age. If you have a teenage child whose level of intellectual functioning is similar to a 7-year-old, for instance, gear your response toward his or her developmental level. Start by giving less information. Provide details or [information](#) in the most appropriate and clear way you can.

What's helpful to a child with an autism spectrum disorder may be different. For instance, the child may find less comfort in cuddling than some other children. Parents should try something else that does calm and comfort their child on other occasions.

Parents may see signs that children are having difficulty adjusting. Some things to look for are:

- Sleep problems: Watch for trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares or other sleep disturbances.
- Physical complaints: Children may complain of feeling tired, having a headache or stomachache, or simply feeling unwell.
- Trouble concentrating: It may be harder for children to focus in school or to complete their homework if they are upset about a tragedy that has occurred.
- Changes in behavior: Look for signs of regressive behavior, including acting more immature or becoming less patient and more demanding. A child who once separated easily from her [parents](#) may become clingy.
- Emotional problems: Children may experience undue sadness, depression, anxiety or fears.

If you are concerned about how your [children](#) are coping, talk with your pediatrician.

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