

Supporting Students When Tragic Incidents Occur: Tips for Teachers and Parents

Tragic incidents that hurt innocent people are frightening and upsetting. Children and youth will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Families and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and, perhaps, even use the process as a learning experience.

All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
2. **Reassure children they are safe** and (if true) so are the important adults and other loved ones in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help ensure their immediate safety and that of their community.
3. **Remind them trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, and the government are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies like this occur.
4. **Let children know it is okay to feel upset.** Explain all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
5. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening. At the same time it will be important to tell children that while the threat of terrorism is real, the chances they will be personally affected is low.
6. **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened, or where another attack might occur. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
7. **Be careful not to stereotype people or countries that might be associated with the incident.** Children can easily generalize negative statements and develop prejudice. ***Stop any bullying or teasing immediately.***
8. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of incidents and threats to safety in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. ***For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!***

9. **Maintain a “normal” routine.** To the extent possible stick to normal classroom or family routines but don’t be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.

10. **Monitor or restrict exposure** to scenes of the event as well as the aftermath. In particular, monitor exposure to social media. For older children, caution against accessing news coverage from only one source.

11. **Observe children’s emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child’s level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express fear or grief.

12. **Be aware of children at greater risk.** Children who have a connection to this particular event, have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

13. **Provide an outlet for students’ desire to help.** Consider making get well cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy.

14. **Keep lines of communication open between home and school.** Schools are a good place for children to experience a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers is helpful. Schools should inform families about available resources, such as talking points or counseling, and plans for information sharing and discussions with students. Parents should let their child’s teacher or school mental health professional know if they have concerns or feel their child may need extra support.

15. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don’t ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let your children know you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

***Adapted from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), 2015. www.nasponline.org**