

Guidelines for Talking with Children About Death

1. Take your cues from your child.

Invite her to tell you what she has heard about the tragedy, and how she feels. Since many children aren't able to express their emotions through words, other helpful outlets include drawing pictures, or telling stories about their memories of the classmates who died.

2. Be developmentally appropriate.

Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer your child's questions. Do your best to answer honestly and clearly. It's okay if you can't answer everything; being available to your child is what matters.

3. Focus on safety.

A child's primary concern after this kind of tragedy may be whether it could happen to him. You can let him know that such events are very rare, that you place a high priority on safety, and are confident that he and your family are safe. You can also assure him that this kind of tragedy is investigated carefully, to identify causes and help prevent it from happening again. It's confidence-building for kids to know that we learn from negative experiences.

4. Be calm.

It's okay to let your child know if you're sad, but if you talk to your child about a traumatic experience in a highly emotional way, then she will likely absorb your emotion and very little else. If, on the other hand, you remain calm, she is likely to grasp what's important: that tragic events can upset our lives, even deeply, but we can learn from bad experiences and work together to grow stronger.

5. Be available.

If your child is upset, just spending time with him may make him feel safer. Children find great comfort in routines, and doing ordinary things together as a family may be the most effective form of healing.

6. Memorialize the children.

Drawing pictures, planting a tree, sharing stories, or releasing balloons can all be good, positive ways to help provide closure to a child. It's important to assure your child that a person continues to live on in the hearts and minds of others.

One good way is to plan an activity in memory of the children who died. Whether it's planting a garden, or organizing a bake sale to raise money for children in need, it's helpful for them to feel part of a community that shares their feelings. And in doing something for others they will not only feel good about themselves but will learn a very healthy way to respond to grief.

Published: December 27, 2011

Read [Helping Children Deal with Grief](#) for more information.