

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAGIC EVENTS

As a parent, are you concerned or overwhelmed about major tragedies in the news? Are you worried and anxious about how to discuss these tragedies with your child? Do you try to avoid the conversation and hope your child won't hear about it? Do you brush over the details with vague answers to their questions? Do you speak candidly with your child? The likelihood that your child remains oblivious to the events that are unfolding around them is remote.

When considering how to discuss a tragic event with a child, keep in mind the **age** and **maturity** level of your child. Even if you try to shield your child from the horrors of the news, they can hear about it on the playground or read about it on-line. Just because your child has not talked to an adult in their life about it, does not mean they have not seen or heard details of the tragedy.

Sometimes you need to begin asking **a few questions** to find out what your child already knows. Depending on the age of a child, it is important to **not overwhelm** them with too many details. Do not try to analyze the tragic event, give only the facts that you know, and **decide** what you feel your child can process.

How you discuss the events with your child can impact their beliefs about the world they live in. Will you focus on the horrors or will you focus on the good people who are working at keeping the world safe? To send the message to your child that bad things happen in this world but together, as family, you are strong enough to handle it creates **safety** and **resiliency**.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO CREATE SAFETY FOR YOUR CHILD?

- Point out the goodness you see in everyday life, particularly amidst the tragedies: look for the **heroes** and the **helpers**; the **kindness**, **bravery** and **courage**.
- Point out to your child that most people are **good** and **kind** and have no intention of hurting them.
- As a family, become empowered to show kindness to others, particularly our first responders.
- Write a thank you note or draw a picture for a police officer, fire fighter or paramedic.
- Monitor the exposure to media and social media for yourself and your child. Being inundated with constant violence in the news is not healthy.
- Do not let young children watch negative news.

These tragedies can be especially disturbing for you, as a parent. Take note of how you are feeling and processing the trauma. Do not obsess about the news, videos or social media; your child is watching you. They will follow your lead. **Model calmness**.

Adults may be more affected than children. The focal points where the violence took place may be places you visited, seen on TV, or attended sporting events. **Talk** to someone you trust about how you are feeling. If you cannot handle the big emotions you are feeling, expecting your child to is unrealistic.

Encourage your child to focus on activities that **"ground"** them; keeping them in the **present**, remind them they are **safe** now, and to consider what they have **control** of. Stay busy with activities that are enjoyable, particularly something you can do together. Promote **positive mental, physical and spiritual**

wellness. Connect your child with other trusting adults who care for your child, such as an *aunt, uncle, grandparents, teacher, coach, Pastor, neighbor or family friend*.

Most importantly, let your child know that you are *always available* to them, to *talk* to and to *answer* their questions. Check in with your child every few days to see what they are thinking about, how they are feeling. If you feel after a couple of weeks they are having difficulty processing the tragedies, it may be time to speak to a mental health professional.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Division Social Worker. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to encourage success in school. Tammy advocates for students and provides a link between the student and other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for nearly 20 years and is a mother to 4 children, 3 of which are teenagers.