

Talking to children *about crisis*



When tragedy strikes, it can be hard to handle. Like everyone else, middle graders struggle to understand why an event happened. They also want to know how it will affect their daily lives. Here are some suggestions for helping your middle schooler cope with a tragic event.

Talk about the tragedy

Discuss your concerns as soon as possible. Don't wait for your child to mention the subject. It's healthy for him to see your interest and response. Talking about the situation will not increase his fear—but avoiding it may cause him to keep quiet about his own worries.

Although it's important for your middle grader to share his feelings and reactions, remember that children may respond in different ways. Some will want to voice their reaction immediately. Others may take some time before they mention anything. Whatever your tween's response, try to be patient. Making sure youngsters feel comfortable discussing their concerns is crucial to how well they handle a situation.



Listen

Keep a ready ear and an open mind for whatever your child wishes to say about the crisis. Provide words such as "afraid," "angry," "sad," and "guilty" to help your middle grader express his emotions.

Try to remain calm if your child expresses ideas that seem inappropriate. As an adult, try to step back and take a few deep breaths. Then, ask your child if he understands the importance of the situation. Explain the difference between the fantasy violence of movies and television and the pain and suffering of violent acts in real life.

Also, listen for clues that your tween is angry. These include sudden outbursts, sadness, conflicts at school, and complaints of stomach pains and headaches.



Offer action

It's understandable for middle graders to feel angry during a crisis. Chances are, many parents are experiencing the same emotion. After all, anger is a normal response to a tragedy. The important thing is to find ways to deal with these painful feelings.

One way is to turn anger into a healthy response. *Example:* Send a letter of support for the victims to your local newspaper. If your tween expresses a desire to "do something" about the situation, suggest ways she can help. Perhaps she could collect donations for the victims or volunteer at a relief organization. Your child needs to find healthy and appropriate ways to deal with her emotions.

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Maintain routines

A local or national crisis often interrupts everyday life. For your middle grader's peace of mind, try to get back to a normal routine as soon as possible. Resume the same school and home schedules you had before the event.

Doing this can help reassure your child and provide a welcome distraction from the situation at hand.

Limit exposure to news coverage of an event to normal levels.

Being curious about a tragedy is normal. But too much exposure can be unhealthy for a youngster.

The same goes for parents. If your middle grader sees you glued to the television each evening, chances are she will want to watch, too. For the sake of the household, try to avoid dwelling on the event.



Be honest

Try to answer questions honestly. Lies and half-truths won't protect your tween from the pain of the moment. In fact, dishonesty may cause him to wonder why you don't trust him with the truth. This can damage the parent-child relationship, which is especially important during this time.

Try to limit your answers to specific questions. It's not necessary to provide more detail about the event than your middle grader asks for. Too much information can be overwhelming.

After a tragedy, it's natural for your child to wonder what will happen next. Most adults may be wondering the same thing. Truth is, you may not have all the answers. As a parent, it's okay to admit when you're unsure.

Instead, try to discuss what matters most to your middle grader—the security of your family. Reassure your child that you are doing everything you can to make sure he is safe.

Take care of yourself

Parents tend to focus on the security of their children during severe times. But it's also important for parents to make sure they're handling the situation in a healthy manner. Coping can include talks with friends and relatives, taking a personal day at work, exercising, or enjoying a favorite hobby.

Stress can cause you to feel unusually impatient. It may also disrupt sleeping and eating habits. Sometimes it's necessary to see a counselor to discuss the situation. Other times, a little distraction might help. Do you like to do



crossword puzzles? How about bowling? Just like your middle grader, you should resume your normal life as soon as possible. This will help you handle your emotions and show your tween how best to get on with her life.

Remember: Dealing with a crisis takes time and patience. It's important for life at home to return to normal, but don't expect your middle grader to simply stop worrying about the event. With lots of love and support, you can help your child learn to cope with traumatic events.

Additional resources

- The website of the National Association of School Psychologists has ideas and articles on helping children cope with crisis. nasponline.org, 866-331-NASP
- A booklet from the National Institute of Mental Health offers advice for handling tweens' questions and concerns. nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-parents/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-what-parents-can-do.pdf, 866-615-6464
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has advice for parents on reacting to their youngsters' stress and includes resources for children who need extra help. samhsa.gov/MentalHealth/Tips_Talking_to_Children_After_Disaster.pdf, 877-SAMHSA-7

Middle Years