

Talking To Your Children About School Shootings
Video Three
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In this lesson, we're finally going to talk about how to talk to your kids about the recent school shootings. However, the things we discussed in the first two lessons are vital to the information we will share in this lesson, so if you haven't watched the first two videos, I suggest you go watch them now and then come back to this one.

As we begin, remember that providing a safe place to live and a regular routine will go a long way toward making your children feel secure. And it is inside a safe environment like that that they will be more inclined to share their thoughts and feelings.

Usually, a good conversation flows best out of a shared experience, so if your child is young, you might color or draw a picture together, or build a fort out of Legos. With older children, it might be playing a game of basketball or sitting in a boat waiting for the fish to bite or sitting in the dark watching a fire burn in the fireplace. Choosing a time when you can relax the rules about chores and bedtime will help create a freer environment. But just showing up and saying "Let's talk!" usually goes over about like a nurse telling an adult "take off your clothes and put on this gown with no back in it."

You should have two or three goals for this discussion that can be written as questions. For instance, you may want to know how your children are feeling about the recent school shootings so one question may be *do these recent school shootings have my children upset?* For each question, then, write down the possible answers - both positive and negative. If you study these for a while, it will help you know how to guide the conversation and keep things on track.

For middle school age kids and older, you can be fairly blunt and direct. "These school shootings have really troubled me, and I'm curious as to what you and your friends are saying about it," is one way to open a conversation with your older children. "What are your teachers and friends at school saying about the school shootings we've had recently" is another. Or you can simply say "Let's

pray for everyone at that school.” That alone may be all the encouragement your kids need to get them talking. If not, it will open the door for you to ask how they are doing, or if any of their friends at school are troubled by it, or if any of their friends knew anyone at that school. With teenagers, it’s easier to go right to the point and get the discussion going. Once the conversation gets going, it will take on a life of its own and you will.

With a younger child, you can’t just jump in to a heavy discussion like that. Enter gently, asking how their day went, what was good, what wasn’t so good. Let the conversation go where they take it. You can steer it around by asking questions, but keep listening. Your child may have some concerns, but they may not be the ones you think he or she has. Let them tell you what they are.

Remember to make things age-appropriate and non-threatening. Keep your words simple - even with older children. It lowers the chances of misinterpreting what each other is saying. Consider also your child’s attention span. His mind may wander and you’ll need to bring it back. Don’t rush. You can’t be in a hurry.

If you need to spur the conversation a bit, ask them *what’s been the hardest thing they’ve ever had to do*. Or, ask *what about school do you like the most and what do you dislike the most?*

A person’s hopes and fears are the most intimate things he or she possesses. To talk about those things makes a person feel vulnerable - even if it’s with those they love and trust the most. So, if your child is showing signs of being upset or troubled, you might consider breaking the ice by being vulnerable first. You might talk about how you felt when your best friend got cancer, or how you felt when your girlfriend dumped you, or how losing your job hurt your self esteem. Remember, you aren’t going for the shock factor here - you just want to help them overcome the uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability. So, carefully select an experience that does that without making your child think their fears are insignificant. But remember, save this for a time when you know your child is struggling emotionally.

If the conversation doesn’t go anywhere, you might ask how you can help your child conquer their greatest fear. Again, you would need to word that question based on the comprehension level of your child, but it might spur a

discussion on things that today's kids are afraid of versus what frightened children when you were growing up.

Once the conversation takes off, let it go in the direction the child leads it. Let them take it where they want it to go. A young child will wander around, but if you let them talk, they will give you plenty of opportunities to ask questions that will help you get to your purpose. By asking one of the questions we mentioned earlier, you can guide them back if you think they are on a tangent with no end.

As your conversation moves along, your child may talk about what they are thinking or feeling. Don't act shocked by what they say. Don't debate what they say they feel. You can ask clarifying questions, but you face the danger of them clamming up if they sense that you think something is wrong with how they feel. Remember, they are sharing the things that make them feel the most vulnerable, so you can shut them down if you aren't careful. Don't argue with them or tell them that they shouldn't feel the way they do. Let them express themselves without a reaction from you.

To keep your child talking, be careful how you respond. When they talk about their hurts and disappointments, don't say Get Over It! Don't tell them that big boys don't cry. Don't tell them that their problem is nothing compared to what they will face in a few years. To them, their problems are huge. If you don't recognize how big these things are to them, they'll stop telling you about them. So, use comforting and encouraging words and phrases as you respond back to your child. Say things like *I bet that was hard for you* or *I'm proud of the way you handled that*.

Use phrases that link you together. Say things like *this is hard for all of us*. Ask them *what can we do to make this less scary for you?* Tell them *I know you miss your friends and that makes you sad*. Choose words that affirms that you are walking this road with them.

As the conversation moves along, be careful to not personalize your child's statements or reactions. If they express fear, don't call them a scaredy cat. Don't tell them they are weak or stupid or crazy because of what they think or feel. Remember: a person cannot help how they feel. If what they feel is wrong, you can help them reframe those feelings by reframing their thoughts. So keep

listening and keep them talking, but don't label them by attaching their feelings to their identity.

An example of reframing a child's thoughts so they will change their feelings - if your child says they are afraid to go to school because anybody can walk right in, ask them if any doors are ever locked. Ask them how they get in the front door if they arrive late. Ask if they ever see police officers around the school. As your child answers these questions, most of the time they will be reframing their thought process because most schools lock their doors and have specific steps to follow to gain access to the buildings. By leading your child through a reframing process, you can help them change their feelings of fear to a sense of security. Creating that sense of security should be your primary goal.

As they talk, listen for ways that you can reassure your child that they are loved, accepted, and safe inside your family. Let them know that home will always be a place where they can process their fears and feelings. The reason for having this conversation should be to help your child, so make sure you listen carefully to what they say and then give an appropriate response. If they are fearful, ask how you can help make them feel better. If they are missing a loved one, set a time to face time them. Do what you can to provide solutions for what they are dealing with. This is just as important for your older children as it is for your younger. The older ones may know how to hide their feelings, but they need the emotional care just as much as younger children do.

Remember to keep the purpose of your conversation in focus. Lots of other topics may arise, but don't let any of them dominate the conversation. If you have multiple children, it's easy for an argument to erupt or an emotional topic to become the major issue, but don't let it happen. Keep the issue the issue! Don't hammer on personalities or bad decisions or past disagreements. Don't play the blame game. Stay on track!

But with all this, what if your child says nothing about their thoughts or fears? For younger children, I'd leave it alone and come back in twenty-four to forty-eight hours and ask a follow-up question about something you'd discussed earlier and see where that takes you. If they still have no desire to discuss the

subject and they are not showing any signs of being upset, I'd let it drop and just keep an eye on things.

With teenagers, you may have to follow-up one-on-one instead of in a group. If you have to make a trip to the grocery store, have one of them ride along and on the way say *I noticed you were quiet when we talked about the school shooting the other day. Is something bothering you?* Those teenage years are full of challenges and your kids may be dealing with other issues that keep them from opening up in front of others. Here is where you have to rely on your personal knowledge of your children. But now that you've broken the ice, you've got an open door to revisit the subject any time you want.

While we hate experiencing these difficult moments in life, they bring us some of the best opportunities to help our children grow stronger in their faith in God. We are spiritual beings and to ignore that is to refuse to provide guidance essential to life. During this discussion, ask your children about their faith in God, about their prayer life, and about their commitment to His word. Let them express the challenges they face, things they find hard to accept, and how it all fits into the way they feel and think. After all, without a relationship with God, none of life's traumas will ever make sense.

One final point - If your child shows signs of being troubled, try to diminish the anxiety without compounding it. For instance, a small child may need a nightlight or a reassuring visit to their room before they drift off to sleep. Normalize the fear response by not allowing it to disrupt your life. Do what is necessary to cope with the rising emotion, but do not allow fear to dominate your family's world. Fear is normal; terror is not. If your child's emotional state has not improved after thirty days or so, you should consider getting advice from a mental health professional. But most of us, including our children, will adjust to these dark events and be fine in a few weeks.

I'm glad you've decided to talk to your children about these horrible events they are having to learn about, but there is more that you can do to help them get through this trauma and all of the ones yet to come. That's the subject of our final lesson. I hope you'll join us.