

## **How To Talk With Your Child About School Shootings**

### **Video Two**

#### **Transcript**

In our previous session, we discussed how trauma is part of life, and helping our children learn to deal with those injuries is essential to growing emotionally healthy children. If you missed that lesson, I suggest you go back and watch that video first. It will make this information much more valuable and helpful.

A parent's job isn't finished when your child eats and sleeps in a nice, safe house, but a parent must work hard to make sure his or her child is developing emotionally. And the first place to look to see if that is happening is in your mirror. Yep, as tough as that may sound, parents play a critical role in the emotional development of their children. So, we're going to spend a few moments taking inventory to see how well prepared you are to help your child deal with life's major emotional disasters.

Now, don't get all stressed out yet. There are no perfect parents. As a matter of fact, perfect parents would pretty much be useless to help young humans navigate the real world. Those who have felt pain and loss have the most to offer those currently experiencing it, and only folks who have made a few wrong turns can show others how to get back on the right path. So, hang in here for the next few minutes and, when we're finished, you'll be more confident that you can effectively help your child navigate the tough spots in life.

Where are you on the emotional response scale? When things go wrong, or don't go your way, or your plans get blown out of the water, how do you respond? Are you cool, calm, and collected? Do you go ballistic and blame God and nature and everybody within sight for dumping all their anger and hate on you? Or, do you find a dark room and sleep for three days?

How do you respond when bad things happen?

It's important that you answer honestly because how you respond to bad things affects everybody around you - especially your young children. They can't calmly process a bad thing when momma is screaming in the phone and dad is throwing cups at the living room wall.

So, when things go bad, what part of your response do you handle well, and what part is kind of out of control? You may never be able to change all your bad responses to good, but you can work on getting better. And you should work at it, because you are the most important piece of your child's emotional stability. If every little thing is a major tragedy for you, then your children will have a difficult time finding emotional stability.

When a parent has a difficult time managing their own emotional responses, fear is usually their default emotion. And the way they deal with that fear is to pass it on. If they are afraid their child may get hurt at school, they talk about it and obsess about it until their child is afraid they will be hurt at school. If they fear thunderstorms, they act it out until their children also become frightened by thunderstorms.

See how it works? Fear passed around is not a good emergency management plan! So, if fear is your go-to response, you need to get someone to help you fix that. Life is full of tough times that will bring its own fear and anxiety. The last thing your child needs is for you to perpetuate more.

While you are still looking in the mirror, are there other traumatic experiences that are still unsettled in your mind? Long after the physical evidence of a loss is gone, the emotional wound can still be open. Sometimes, those injuries pile up inside us and they begin to color how we see the world. So while you are still taking self-inventory, you need to make sure that the troubles of the past aren't compounding the problems of the present.

Remember that trauma never travels alone, but it always brings your past with it. Sometimes that works to your advantage when your mind recognizes pain it's experienced before and starts processing it before you even know what's happening. But many times, traumas from the past bring back a flood of hurts and unpleasant memories that can turn your smaller present pain into a huge emotional event. These moments can even sneak up on you and the emotional flood can catch you by surprise. So, if the issue you want to discuss with your child is very emotional for you, move slowly so the unresolved issues from yours and their pasts don't overwhelm you and keep you from being able to have the discussion you need to have.

A stable home environment is important for a child's emotional development. Having and maintaining a daily routine will produce a sense of security and normalcy. Those two things, security and normalcy, are especially important for children who've recently experienced trauma. Remember, things like divorce or a close friend moving away can be very traumatic for a child. Even if the child is too young to fully comprehend everything that is going on, the experience can still be traumatic. Maintaining a routine and having a place that is their own is important for a child's sense of security - even if, on the outside, it appears that they are doing fine. So, if you plan to discuss things like school shootings with your child, try to have that talk at home or at least in a place they are familiar with and where they feel secure. And make sure you can set aside a little time to spend with them afterward. Depending on the age of your child, they may be a little clingy or want to be close. Don't have this talk and then hurry off to work. Remember: creating a sense of security is probably more important than your speech, so spend the time it takes to create that.

As a parent, you need to be aware that these traumatic events can affect every part of your child's life. It can interrupt their sleep habits, give them headaches and stomachaches, make them want to eat less or eat more, cause them to wet the bed, make them worry about everything, cause emotional outbursts - there is nothing about a person's life that trauma cannot touch, and it's especially so with children. Sometimes when life gets real busy, especially for a single parent, it's so easy to get frustrated with these behaviors instead of having time to consider that they may be caused by something other than your child's stubbornness or your bad luck. So, if you're going to have a serious talk, pay attention to these things a few days ahead of time, if possible.

Since you're still looking in that mirror ... how well do you handle tough subjects? There are many things about life that we can't explain. Why do babies get cancer? Why do old people get dementia and forget who their children are? Things like these can't fully be explained, and sometimes people invent fairy tales to cover what we don't know. I've got to tell you that in helping children deal with trauma, that doesn't work. You can't help them by telling a lie or a half-truth. So if you aren't willing to speak the truth, including admitting what you

don't know, or if you are uncomfortable ignoring certain questions or changing the subject, then everybody might be better off if you just skip the talk altogether.

Your child has got to be able to trust you, so you've got to tell them the truth. If you don't have an answer, say so. Don't make something up. And don't make promises you can't keep. You can't prevent car wrecks and tornados and cancer, so don't tell them that nobody they love will ever be hurt by them. You can assure them that you will protect them with all the life you have, but you aren't preparing them for the real world they are living in by pretending to be God. Instead, if they ask those hard questions, use that opportunity to teach them to have faith and trust in God. Obviously a four-year-old will not be ready for a ten minute bible study, but a thoughtful sentence or two about how together we must trust God will set their minds in the right direction, and will assure them that you are right there trusting God with them. Your approach must be age appropriate, so in some cases the less said the better. But if you have this talk about school shootings, don't tell your kids that it will never happen to them, or that you will kill anybody who tries to harm them, or that God will not let anything bad happen to them. Those are things you cannot control. Instead, help them build their own faith in God. Teach them to be aware of their surroundings. Tell them what their school is doing to protect them. Show them how to protect themselves, if you want. But don't tell lies. They'll figure it out and wonder what other lies you've told them.

To be effective, you can't just say what you want to say and be done with it. The point of the first lesson was to help you determine what needed to be said and what needed to be left unsaid so that your children hear what they need to hear. Sometimes what you want to say and what your child needs to hear are two different things. This is one time when what your child needs to hear is far more important than what you want to say.

So, to wrap this all up.

Make sure you give you kids what they need and don't just recite words you want to say.

Don't make yourself feel better by making everybody else more afraid.  
Second-hand fear is deadly.

Make sure you aren't letting your past hurts goof things up. Divorced and blended family parents need to be especially mindful of this possibility. Don't make your children pay just because you are still hurting.

Provide a safe environment and a daily routine for your children so they have a sense of security.

And finally, life isn't a Disney movie. You don't help your children prepare for the traumas of life by telling them lies. When there is no answer, let your vulnerability pull you to each other and to the God who holds us all in His hand.

Well, now are you ready to have that talk?

We'll give you some suggestions about that in the next lesson.