

How To Talk To Your Child About School Shootings Transcript - Video One

Before jumping head-first into a heavy discussion with your children about bad things they've experienced or heard about, you need to gather as much information as you can. In the rush to help your child, you can make things a whole lot worse without realizing it. So, before we talk about what to say to your children, let's set the stage for that discussion.

First - never assume that your child is upset or scared just because you think they should be. The last thing you want to do is project your fears or insecurities onto your children. We'll talk more about this in the next video, but if you are upset and out of control, fix that first - and then come back and talk to your kids. But just because something has upset you, don't assume it will trouble your child.

For many of us, the thought of children being shot and killed while at school is totally foreign. Because school was such a safe place when we were kids, we can't wrap our heads around the fact that people will actually shoot harmless children while they sit in a classroom.

But kids going to school today never lived during a time when there were no school shootings. It's a sad commentary on our society, but today's kids have grown up in a world where school shootings are almost common. So, you and I probably view school shootings differently than your children do. We see them as horrific and frightening tragedies, but don't be surprised if your child sees them as just another ho-hum event in their unexciting life.

While that is difficult for us grown-ups to even process, you've got to understand that your children will interpret world events based on their life experiences - not on ours. So, just because these shootings have you all worried and distressed, don't assume that your child is reacting the same way. Maybe they are; maybe they aren't.

So - don't assume that you know what your child is feeling or thinking. You don't want to put fear into a young heart that is coping well with the bad things life throws at them.

Second - accept your child's feelings and thoughts regardless of how different they are from what you expect. Reactions to life's tough struggles run the gamut from no response to freaking out. Your child is not a clone of you - and they will have their own reactions to life. Don't try to force them to feel and think like you. Accept what they are experiencing as normal. Don't try to shame them, guilt them, or pressure them into changing how they feel. If they express thoughts or feelings that bother you, we'll talk about how to deal with that later on. But you can't dictate how people - including your own child - will react to life. You might as well not begin the discussion if you are going to overreact to their response because nothing will ruin the process any faster.

So, we won't assume we know how our children are feeling, and we will accept their revealed feelings as normal.

We must also understand the difference between crisis and trauma. We often use the words interchangeably, but they are really two very different terms.

Trauma is a distressing or disturbing event. It can be something physical that is easily seen - like a blow to the head. You can see the wound and the effects of the event, and can tell immediately that this event is going to disrupt that person's normal way of life. Pretty obvious.

But there are traumas that are not as easily seen. A man loses his job. A girl's puppy runs away. Someone's mother dies. A storm floods a family's home. You may have seen the factory where the man worked, or the puppy that ran away, or the lady who died, but you cannot see all the damage and all the wounds that are left behind. As a matter of fact, most of life's most distressing wounds are invisible, and those who suffer them try to hide them behind a smile or a huge personality or a wall of silence. But regardless, those wounds are just as painful and disruptive as a broken arm or lacerated head that everyone can see.

Now, here is where folks get trauma and crisis confused. Just because a person suffers a traumatic event that distresses and disrupts his life - that does not mean that he is in a crisis. Most of the time when you have a traumatic event, your brain and your coping mechanisms will kick-in and get you through it.

But, every once in a while, your brain and your coping mechanisms fail - and that creates the crisis.

Let's look at it like this.

Humans are constantly thinking and feeling. Most of the time, our thinking overpowers our feeling. If your bicycle turns over in the middle of the street, even though your knee is bleeding and you feel the pain, your thinking overpowers the pain and you drag yourself and your bike out of the middle of the road so you don't get run over. You've experience a small trauma, but you aren't in a crisis because your mind is still coherently processing the event.

But say, when your bike burned over, your leg started bleeding and you thought you'd severed an artery, so instead of getting out of the way of oncoming traffic, you sit in the middle of the street holding your leg and screaming at the top of your voice. Now, your feelings have overpowered your thinking and you are no longer logically processing your experience. You are now having a crisis, and if someone doesn't help you, you might get hit by a car.

When a person's feelings overpower their thinking and they lose the ability to logically process their current experience, they are in a crisis.

That's important for you to know, because people can exhibit signs of emotional pain, but still be appropriately processing life. Crying, screaming, even anger can all be expressed within the scope of a normal emotional response.

So remember, your child may be demonstrating many emotional responses, but that doesn't mean that they are out of control or in crisis. Again — take time to find out where they are instead of arbitrarily assigning them a crisis.

The truth is - most people will deal with all of life's traumas without ever going into crisis mode. That's the power of a good system of coping mechanisms that we will talk about later.

So, to review again: never assume that you know how your child is feeling, and never devalue their feelings by disputing or minimizing them, and just because they have seen or experienced something really bad, don't assume they are in a crisis. They may just need some time to process what they are experiencing.

When working with others, and especially with children, knowledge is power. Kids can usually deal with the future if they know what to expect. So before you start a conversation with your child about school shootings, know as many

details as you can. What is your child's school doing to keep them safe? What is their safety response plan? Educate yourself before talking with your child so that you can give them helpful information they can use to ease their minds about the future. If your child has questions and you don't supply the answers, they will fill in the blanks themselves with information gotten from random sources or fed by their own fears.

Many times, children do not know how to ask for the help they need, so, depending on their age, you may need to do some thinking for them and anticipate what information you can give that will make them feel secure.

This is another concept we'll repeat - but never lie to your child or make promises you cannot keep. Your child has got to be able to trust you. Most of the time, you are their greatest source of stability. When they can't believe what you say, it makes the world a dark and scary place.

Also - be careful about discussing traumatic experiences with other parents' children. Trauma never travels alone. Every bad experience is colored by all the other experiences a person has had. You can't kick one trauma around in a person's mind without it moving another. Since you don't know all that's going on in another child's world, you're usually better off letting their parents or caregivers help them. At the very least, make sure you have their mom and dad's permission before you talk with them.

If, as a teacher for instance, you've got to address these issues with other people's children, I'd suggest giving positive and specific direction as a group, and avoid one-on-one in depth consultations when possible.

To set the stage for discussing serious events like school shootings with your child, here are three things to do to get prepared.

First. Limit your child's exposure to media that continually discusses or rebroadcasts images and stories surrounding school shootings. If your child is already troubled, the continued debates and discussions will only serve to keep their mind occupied with those negative thoughts and images. Instead, feed their minds with things that will help them.

If you haven't yet figured it out, the news media is not your family's best friend. They have their own agendas, and helping your children probably isn't

doesn't even make the list. So, be careful what you let them unload in your children's brains.

Number Two. Ask your child's teachers, bus driver, Sunday School teacher, or any other adult who regularly interacts with your child, if they have noticed any recent changes in your child's behavior. Have they gotten more quiet/loud? Do they complain of being sick? Are they hanging with a disruptive crowd? Fear and stress create physical responses and you may not be in a position to notice them all. See what adults you trust may have witnessed.

Number Three. Help your child learn to normalize painful life experiences. I'm not suggesting that we treat school shootings as insignificant events and shake them off like dust on an old jacket. I'm simply pointing out that, despite the best that we can do, life is going to dump lots of painful things in your child's lap that they must process and handle. If you can start helping them learn that now, it will also help them process the bigger, troublesome things like school shootings. We aren't telling them to devalue human life, but we are teaching them to develop a plan instead of freaking out.

In our next session, we will take all this information one step further and help you be prepared to help your child deal with these emotional traumas. I look forward to seeing you there.