

Tips for Parents on How to Talk to Kids about Tragedy

These are tips compiled from CUSD's Psychology Department and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. You know your child best and should therefore use your discretion in tailoring your discussions with your child based on his/her personality and age.

- Conversations about this topic with your children should be qualitatively different than those with your peers and spouses. Be tolerant and accepting of a wide range of reactions including no reaction at all. No overt reaction to a situation like this does not mean that children are unaware or unconcerned. Nor does it necessarily mean that the child's lack of reaction is unhealthy.
- Start the conversation. Talk about the event with your child; not talking about it makes the event even more threatening in your child's mind.
- What does your child already know? Start by asking what your child has already heard about the events from the media as well as from friends. Listen for what understanding he or she has reached.
- Gently correct inaccurate information. If you hear inaccurate information or misunderstandings, provide the correct information at a level that your child can understand.
- Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly. Your child may have some difficult questions about the events in Florida. Whatever questions your child may have, answer. This lets the child know that you are open to talking about anything and can be trusted to answer.
- Help those in need. Work with your child to figure out a way that he or she can help the people who were affected by the disaster, such as making a card that can be sent (often agencies such as churches or Red Cross will accept such cards). If they work, this may include making a small donation from their earnings or allowance.
- Be a positive role model. Consider sharing your feelings about the tragic event with your child. This is an opportunity for you to role model how to cope and how to plan for the future. Before you reach out, however, be sure you are able to express a positive or hopeful plan.
- Be patient. In times of stress, children may have more trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. They will need a little extra patience, care, and love.
- If you have concerns about your child's behavior, contact your family's pediatrician, other primary care provider, or a qualified mental health care specialist.
- Sometimes the most helpful action you can take to support your children is to simply BE THERE...quietly, reflectively, lovingly.
- Emphasize hope. Be honest and authentic about your sorrow and concern, but reassure the child about his or her future in any way that is realistic. Most small and elementary age children are asking "Are you afraid?" in order to determine whether or not they should be. It's okay to let your child know you have fears and concerns, but put them in perspective.
- Limit your child's media exposure to coverage about the event as it can be disturbing and difficult to process for young children.