

Tips for talking with and helping children and young people cope after community violence

Extreme and distressing events like public shootings, hate crimes, terrorist threats, violent racist demonstrations, and other acts of community violence, are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

This resource sheet includes some helpful resources for parents, caregivers and teachers for helping children and young people to cope following community violence.



Guidelines for parents, caregivers and teachers

Extreme and distressing events like public shootings, hate crimes, terrorist threats, violent racist demonstrations and other acts of community violence, are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

Many people can have strong emotional or physical reactions like sorrow, anger, confusion, or even fear after an incident of community violence. Whilst they may not have experienced the incident first hand, these emotional reactions can be sadness for the people who lost their lives or lost loved ones, as well as a response to other types of losses. They may experience the loss of their sense of safety, their trust in those who live in their neighbourhood, or their trust in the government and the authorities, or the event might trigger feelings around a personal experience of violence or loss.

For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the feelings and reactions may last longer and be more severe. Even following such events from a distance in the media can be distressing. Indeed, the way the media portray these events can make them seem even more overwhelming or distressing.

What can parents, caregivers and teachers do?

Engage in age-appropriate honest discussions

Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the events. Let them know that talking about it can be a good thing.

Parents, carers and teachers of school aged children may need to open the conversation about the event and its aftermath. Say things like "As you know, there was a [shooting in PLACE XYZ]. Many people were killed or injured. I want to talk with you about this and answer any questions or worries you may have".

It is not necessary to share gruesome details of the event, but do provide truthful but simple information that will help them to separate fact from fiction and clear up any misinformation about what happened. Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events.

Children and young people will also want to know 'why'. These questions are harder, but children need our best answers. They need honest, thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of the event, and again, to clear up any misinformation. This is also an important opportunity for learning and imparting pro-social values (see below).

Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings

Help children and young people to put words to feelings.

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them. They may talk about it in their own time or after a few days rather than the first time you have a conversation, so try to be open to this.

Let them know that crying is fine when they need to.



Monitor media exposure

Children can become distressed and fearful after watching repeated images of frightening events on the television, as well as other forms of media, and can come to believe that the world is a scary place. Many children retain longer-term recurrent, disturbing memories from viewing violence.

Adults can shield young children from traumatic events by not letting them see or hear media reports or overhear adult conversations about the events.

If older children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective. Being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions. These events and reactions will likely be depicted through social media, which can be more difficult for parents to monitor. It is important to prepare young people for this exposure (including other people's reactions to it) and to monitor social media use as well as reinforce the above messages.

Talk about how to treat others

These events are a chance to have discussions about how to treat others, and to share values about what sort of a society you want to have.

You can use it to open up a frank discussion about realities in society and the ways in which some people who live in this country are treated. Hate and prejudice are not innate but learned.

Let children and young people know that no one deserves any act of violence for their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, or other beliefs.

Avoid stereotyping, narrow analyses of the problem, disaster or crisis, and the blaming of whole groups for the actions of few.

Help children to separate angry thoughts and feelings about specific people who behave in cruel ways from the larger cultural or religious group to which those people may belong.

Define the problem group (e.g. bigots, haters, terrorists, violent activists) narrowly. A narrow definition reduces the problem's impact and the potential leverage of people advocating or using violence.

Explain to them that people who advocate hate and violence are a tiny minority. It's a problem, but it's a small problem relative to many other challenges we face in society like homelessness, poverty, discrimination, or environmental destruction.

Let them know that hate directed at anyone who is different is unacceptable, and that meeting hate and violence with more hate and violence does not solve the problem.

Discuss the importance of encouraging peace and non-violence at all levels of society, by promoting understanding of people from different groups, supporting ways that strengthen people's cultural identities, teaching conflict resolution skills, and changing social norms (making it unacceptable to be violent or hateful).



Look out for possible stress reactions

Look out for changes in children's usual behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed. This may include difficulty sleeping, being more clingy than usual, or changes in appetite. There may also be problems with attention and concentration, an increase in irritability and mood swings, or being more withdrawn than usual.

Exercise, eating healthy meals, and plenty of rest are all helpful.

Encourage children to do the things they used to enjoy doing, and to play and laugh.

Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of attention and affection. Let them be more dependent on you for a while.

Maintain good routines – predictable activity at home and school is very reassuring for children and young people.

Recognise safety and security needs and reassure children

People often have heightened concerns about their own safety after tragedy.

Talk to children and young people about the helpers and the heroes that help to make the world a better place.

Let children know that there are many people across the country working hard to make sure that people stay as safe as possible before, during and after any emergency, disaster or traumatic event and that these people are very good at their job.

Reassure children and let them know that they are safe and are being looked after, and that nothing bad will happen to them personally.

Make this an opportunity to discuss family or school plans for safety in the event of an emergency.


Foster hope

In the aftermath of tragic events we can also be reminded of the goodness of people.

Leave children with a sense of security but also hope, and help them to see that their world is basically a safe place, people are usually good, and that life is worth living.

Help them to see that there can be positive changes that come from distressing or tragic events, for example:

- Increasing the motivation for us to turn the tide of violence and fear and work harder to build a better, safer and respectful society.
- Increasing people's desire to help more and show acts of kindness to others in their community or in other parts of the world.
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones.
- Becoming allies to other people and minority groups who might be in need of support, including those of which you are not a member.



Help children find something positive to do in response to distressing world events, so they feel they can make a positive difference in the world, like:

- Volunteering in the community to help others.
- Donating money that they have personally earned to Red Cross or other emergency organisations.
- Writing thank you notes to the organisations that helped following the event.
- Standing up and speaking up for friends who are being bullied or targeted.

Pay attention to your own reactions

Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to air your own feelings or explore your own reactions to the events.

Share your own feelings, but show that you are in control of them.

Pay attention to your own reactions and model good coping skills for dealing with distressing and confusing events.

Seeking professional assistance

Talking with a psychologist may be helpful if you feel you need further assistance with communication techniques that will assist you in discussing important issues. Your APS psychologist has at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and efficient service.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/