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Honest conversations can help ease your child's fears about school safety

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The recent school shootings raise many questions for children (and grown-ups, too). Who would do such a thing? Why? How can I be sure this won't happen to me? Is anyone really safe?

There are no easy answers about this kind of news, but it is important for parents to try to explain what has happened in order to help ease their fears and anxieties about their personal safety.

"You want to encourage the kids to talk about what's upsetting to them about the situation, to get some of the emotion off their chest," said Dr. Alec L. Miller, a child psychologist with New York's Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

Psychiatrist Dr. Keith Ablow told NBC's "Today" show on Tuesday that parents should not discourage children from discussing the events.

"Believe me, kids are thinking already about it," Ablow told "Today" anchor Meredith Vieira. "They need an adult to coax them to express their feelings and to tell them they are safe and that we're going to do the things we need to protect you."

Parents should also challenge the fear that school shootings are becoming more common, Miller said. While there have been several attacks in a short period of time, parents and educators should discuss how unlikely it is for such an attack to occur at school.

Try to limit excessive rehashing of the news, but "the more important thing to do is make time to discuss it," said Miller.

Be alert for any child getting more upset than a normal response such as losing sleep or having nightmares. "For the average kid, having the opportunity for a day or two to express it and then let it dissipate, that's going to be the normal response," he said.

Melissa Brymer, director of the terrorism and disaster programs at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress at UCLA, suggests talking at a time when you can focus on your child's verbal and nonverbal responses, perhaps after dinner. Bedtime isn't a good choice, since the child's anxiety could spiral late at night.

"Explain that emergencies can happen in many different ways," says Brymer, "and that schools have crisis plans to make sure kids are safe so they can learn."

To guide parents through difficult discussions about school violence, the National Mental Health Association offers the following suggestions:

- **Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings.** Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them.
- **Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding school violence.** It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone.
- **Validate the child's feelings.** Do not minimize a child's concerns. Let him/her know that serious school violence is not common, which is why these incidents attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.
- **Empower children to take action regarding school safety.** Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.
- **Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school.** Explain why visitors sign in at the principal's office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.
- **Create safety plans with your child.** Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

- **Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school.** Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.
- **Keep the dialogue going** and make school safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.
- **Seek help when necessary.** If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center.

Source: [National Mental Health Association](#)

MSNBC's Jane Weaver and the Associated Press contributed to this report

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