

How to talk to children about shootings: An age-by-age guide



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Meghan Holohan
TODAY Contributor

The sinking feeling is becoming all too familiar: When mass shootings occur, parents have to figure out how to talk to their children about violence.

There's no one way to address tragedies with children, and how parents approach it depends both on the child's age and temperament. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend avoiding the topic with children until they reach a certain age – around 8, but again, it depends on the child.

“First, you have to process your own emotional response. What you do will affect them more than what you say,” she says. “Have your first reaction away from your child.”

“If it doesn't directly affect your family, kids under 8 do not need to hear about this,” says Dr. Deborah Gilboa, a parenting expert. Before this age, children struggle to process it.

But parents should talk to their younger children about mass shootings if they are at risk of hearing it from others, she says.

While advice varies by age, Gilboa provides a general recommendation for all parents faced with telling their children about the latest mass shooting.

Preschool-kindergarten: One-sentence story

“You have to figure out before you talk to them what story you want them to tell themselves,” she says.

With young children, Gilboa recommends that parents keep their stories simple. These stories should reinforce parents' beliefs. Perhaps, parents want their children to know that a bad man hurt people. Maybe parents want their children to know that someone with a serious illness felt angry and hurt people.

“You are going to give a one-sentence story to anyone under 6,” she says.

This might be a chance to change the conversation, too. Try to focus on the positives, such as the heroes of the story.

Elementary school children: Shield them

Again, parents need to decide on the takeaway message. Children in this age group will ask many more interrogative questions and parents need to decide how much they want to share.

Gilboa stresses that parents should prevent their children from seeing pictures or the news because the images will stick with children longer than words. If children do see pictures, she recommends that parents show their children positive photos to counteract the negative.

“Let's see if we can replace those memories and balance it out by showing the positives and the amazing people who rushed to help,” she says.

Tweens: Listen to their feelings

Start the conversation by asking tweens if they heard about the latest shooting.

“If you are going to talk [about] a fraught or laden topic ... you start with a pretest. You are going to ask how they feel about it,” Gilboa says.

If they have heard of it, listen to their feelings. If they haven’t heard of it, parents have an opportunity to share their beliefs while gaining better insight into their tweens.

“[This becomes] a great conversation of their values and your values that do not focus on the particular gore [but] more on the person you are raising,” she says.

Teens: Look for solutions

Again, Gilboa says parents should ask their teens if they have heard of the latest tragedy and allow them to share their feelings.

But teenagers will expect more.

“Teenagers are looking for hypocrisy and solutions and this generation believes in collaboration and social justice. And they are going to ask ‘What are you doing,’” she says. “You can answer and then ask ‘what are you doing? What would you like to do? What can we do together?’”

Teaching teenagers to work toward change will help them be resilient, she says. She stresses that parents still need to listen to their teens’ feelings and display empathy.

“I think for anyone action makes us feel effective,” Gilboa says. “What we want our kids to do when [they] see something wrong is to try to fix it.”