AFTER A SCHOOL SHOOTING OR ACT OF MASS VIOLENCE

Talking With Kids When the News Is Frightening

Violence at a school or in a community can shake everyone's sense of safety, even from far away. You don't need perfect words. Children mostly need calm, honest adults who listen and help them feel safe again.

Whatever you're feeling is okay

Parents and caregivers may feel

Fear, sadness, anger, helplessness or numbness. Worry about school drop-off. Unsure what to say.

These are human reactions. You can feel them and still be a steady presence.

Children and teens may feel or show

Worry, confusion, sadness or anger. Clinginess, sleep trouble, stomachaches, irritability, repeated questions. Some seem unbothered.

Each can be normal. Kids process in their own time.

Strong reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event. For most children they ease over the following weeks with support from caring adults.

Care for yourself first

Children take their cues from the adults around them.

Notice your own reactions

Name what you're feeling before you talk with your child, so you can stay steady for them.

Lean on other adults

Talk through your own fears with a partner, friend, or counselor first.

Take a small step

Rest, move, connect with community, or act on what matters to you. It eases helplessness.

How to talk about it

Silence doesn't protect children; they'll hear something anyway. A short, calm talk with you is the safest place to make sense of it.

1 Start with what they know

Ask what they've heard. Gently correct rumors and misunderstandings.

2 Listen more than you talk

Make room for every feeling without judging or rushing to fix it.

3 Limit media exposure

Keep graphic images and nonstop coverage away. Watch or scroll together with older kids.

4 Keep routines steady

Regular meals, school, play, and bedtime signal that life goes on.

5 Avoid blaming groups

One person's violence does not represent any race, religion, or community.

6 Keep the door open

Check in again in a few days. Don't force it; let them know you're ready when they are.

When your child asks, “What happened?”

Use three steps. Age-by-age scripts are on the next page.

1 · Simple facts
Short and true. Say “hurt” and “died,” not “went to sleep.” No graphic details.

2 · Name feelings
Any feeling is okay. Share a calm version of your own.

3 · Safety & connection
Point to helpers and safe adults. It's okay to say “I don't know.”

“Could it happen at my school?”
“It's very unlikely. Many adults work every day to keep you safe there. If you ever feel unsafe, tell me or a teacher.”

“Why did they do it?”
“We may never know all the reasons. What we do know is that most people work hard to protect each other.”

What to say at each age

Ages are a guide. Follow your child's questions and cues, fill in only facts you know are true, and stop when they seem satisfied.

AGES 3–5

Preschool

They sense adult stress more than facts.

- Use few, simple words. Skip details.
- Let play, drawing, and books do the talking.
- Expect clinginess or regression.

IF THEY ASK WHAT HAPPENED

"Someone hurt people at a school far away, and some people died. That is very sad. Lots of helpers came to take care of everyone. You are safe, and I'm right here with you."

AGES 6–8

Early elementary

Brief facts balanced with reassurance.

- Answer the question asked, then pause.
- Watch for stomachaches or bedtime fears.
- Expect repeat questions; stay calm.

IF THEY ASK WHAT HAPPENED

"A person brought a gun to a school in [place] and hurt people. Some people died, and that is sad. Police came to help. This is very rare, and the grown-ups at your school have plans to keep you safe. How are you feeling?"

AGES 9–13

Upper elementary & middle school

Harder questions; info from peers and online.

- Help sort fact from rumor.
- Talk through school safety plans.
- Check what they're seeing on screens.

IF THEY ASK WHAT HAPPENED

"On [day], a person used a gun at [school] and [number] people were hurt or killed. We don't know why yet. It's normal to feel scared or angry. I do too. What have you heard from friends or online?"

AGES 14–18

Teens

Strong opinions; may look fine while struggling.

- Listen to their views without debate.
- Encourage reporting threats to a trusted adult.
- Watch for withdrawal or risk-taking.

IF THEY ASK WHAT HAPPENED

"You've probably seen more online than I have. Here's what's confirmed: [facts]. Early posts are often wrong. I'm feeling [your feeling]. What are you making of it, and how are you and your friends doing?"

Additional resources

YouthLine

Free, confidential support for youth ages 10–24. Youth volunteers answer 4–10 p.m. PT; adults take calls at all other times.

Call 877-968-8491 · **Text** teen2teen to 839863
theyouthline.org

SafeOregon

Anonymous 24/7 tip line for students, parents, and community members to report school safety concerns.

Call or text 844-472-3367
tip@safeoregon.com · safeoregon.com

Sesame Workshop

Free bilingual tools to help young kids cope with scary events.

sesameworkshop.org/topics/violence

American Academy of Pediatrics

Pediatrician guidance for parents after tragedy.

healthychildren.org

American School Counselor Association

"After a School Shooting" family resources.

schoolcounselor.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
nctsn.org · Tip sheets in English & Spanish

Sandy Hook Promise
sandyhookpromise.org · Coping and prevention

National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement
schoolcrisiscenter.org · Talking to kids about tragedies

National Mass Violence Center
nmvvrc.org · Transcend recovery app

National Association of School Psychologists
nasponline.org · Talking to children about violence

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
aacap.org · Talking to children about mass shootings

Coalition to Support Grieving Students
grievingstudents.org · Grief after a crisis

The Dougy Center
dougy.org · After a school shooting

IN AN EMERGENCY | **911** Immediate danger | **988** Suicidal thoughts or crisis · 988lifeline.org

When to reach out for more support

Most reactions fade within weeks. Check in with a school counselor or therapist if you see:

- Reactions lasting beyond a few weeks
- Persistent fear or nightmares
- Ongoing sleep, eating, or school trouble
- Withdrawal or big behavior changes
- Stronger reactions in kids with past trauma, loss, anxiety, or a close tie to the event

Get help right away
if your child talks about hurting themselves or others.

Parents need support too
Talk with your own doctor or therapist, or check whether your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for free counseling.

For general educational purposes only. This guide is not a substitute for therapy or for medical or legal advice and does not create a counselor–client relationship. Every child is different; consult a qualified professional about your child's needs. In an emergency, call 911 or 988. Listed organizations are independent of this practice and included for reference, not endorsement; contact information was accurate as of October 2026 and may change. Content draws on publicly available guidance from NASP, NCTSN, ASCA, and others, and was drafted with AI assistance and reviewed by Katy Stinchfield, MS, LPC, licensed K–12 school counselor. *© 2026 Katy Stinchfield Counseling & Consulting.*