

Family Education Sheet

How to Talk to Your Child about a Scary Event



Boston Children's Hospital

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There is no easy way to talk to your child about a scary event, but talking to your child is one of the most important things you can do as a caring adult.

Don't be afraid to talk to your child about scary topics. Even if you're scared yourself, it's important to stay calm and open to questions. Your child is likely to be comforted simply by the fact that you are listening to their questions and giving answers.

Where should I talk to my child about a scary event?

It is best to talk to your child about a scary event in a comfortable, quiet place with few distractions.

How do I talk to my child about a scary event?

No matter how old your child is, they are going to want to know:



- What does this mean to me?
- Will my family and I be safe?

How and what you tell your child should depend on their age.

- **For children ages 8 and younger**, keep the story as broad and simple as possible.
 - If you're talking about the spread of a virus (like COVID-19 or coronavirus), you might say, "There is a virus that's making people sick so we have to be careful right now."
 - If you're talking about a mass shooting, you might say, "There was an event and some people were hurt."
- **For children over the age of 8**, you can give some facts.
 - If you're talking about the spread of a virus (like COVID-19 or coronavirus) you might say, "It's important to take steps to keep everyone safe by staying home, washing your hands a lot and keeping distance from other people for now."
 - If you're talking about a mass shooting, you might say "It happened late at night. There were serious injuries. They found who did it."
- **If your child is older than 12:**
 - Ask your child what they know about the event; then correct any inaccuracies or misconceptions.
 - Expect an open and honest talk. Be ready for whatever your child wants to discuss.

- Listen respectfully, even if your child has beliefs unlike your own.
- Talk with your child about whatever people are doing, and planning on doing, to keep people safe (for examples: no playdates or school, or more police presence).

Other tips

- **Limit your child's exposure to the media.** Images from the event can be disturbing to your child, especially when viewed repeatedly. 
- **Keep up normal routines**, if you can. 
- **Spend extra time with your child** and tell them you love them. Hugs are also helpful!
- **Let them know that you, and other helping adults, are working all the time to keep them safe.** Talk about some of the ways you do this.

What are the signs of a child having a hard time coping with a scary event?

Your child may have some brief signs of stress. As long as these are short-lived, they should not be signs of more serious problems.

Should these symptoms last more than a week or two, or interfere with your child's daily life in a significant way, you should think about speaking with your child's primary care doctor or a mental health professional.

Signs of a child coping with a scary event may include:

- Anger
- Moodiness
- Clinginess
- Nightmares
- Bedwetting
- Whining
- Tearfulness
- Easily annoyed
- Trouble with schoolwork

Is it okay for my child to act out a scary event?

In addition to talking, your younger child may find it comforting to act out an event through play. This can give your child a sense of power over their environment. While this is OK, be ready to talk to your child about it when it is the right time.

What can I do to help?

When a scary event or tragedy takes place, sometimes you and your child feel helpless. To help that feeling, and teach your child compassion (having feelings of kindness and sympathy for others), here are some things your family can do:

- Give donations to disaster relief organizations.
- Donate blood to the American Red Cross or local hospitals.
- Go to religious services or memorial observances.
- Organize or donate to a clothing or food drive.
- Help someone with a chore or task.
- Write a kind email or letter to a friend or family member.
- Simply talk and listen to someone, and let them share their feelings.

Where can I find more about talking to my child about a scary event?

For more information, visit:

- **Parental Stress Hotline (free and confidential 24/7)**
Call: 1-800-632-8188
- **Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic**
childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic
- **After the Trauma: Helping My Child Cope**
<https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/images/pdf/AftertheTraumaHelpingMyChildCope.pdf>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**
aacap.org
- **American Academy of Pediatrics: Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope After Disaster and Crisis**
aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx
- **American Psychological Association: Recovering Emotionally from Disaster**
apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx
- **American Red Cross: Helping Children Cope with Disaster**
fema.gov/pdf/library/children.pdf
- **Disaster Distress Helpline (24/7 phone and text)**
samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency: Coping with Disaster**
ready.gov/coping-with-disaster

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