



WinterSpring

Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together

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AFTER A VIOLENT DEATH: How to support children and teens

A death that is the result of violence adds layers of complexity to the grieving process for everyone affected because of **trauma**.¹ Whether someone has witnessed the death, or heard about it from somewhere else, the visual images can invade our minds for a long time. Children and teens are especially vulnerable because they don't have the capacity to process this by themselves.

"When I was in elementary school, a mom murdered her two children with a knife, and then stabbed herself to death. The older boy was in my brother's class. No one talked with my brother and me about this murder, but we certainly overheard the adult conversations. I had visual imaginings of the scene, and felt terrified that if a mom could do that, maybe my parents would murder me, too. I remember one evening at dinner, my dad asked my mom for a knife, and I went screaming from the room. No one took my fears seriously, so I was left to figure things out for myself...I have to wonder if my life-long propensity to imagine gruesome worst- case scenarios is related." ~J.L.

As Debra Whiting Alexander, PhD states, "Traumatic memories can replay themselves and interfere with daily living. They are memories like no others. They are difficult to shake and impossible to erase."

What to look for: Parents and other concerned adults should watch children and teens who have experienced a traumatic death for a trauma response: regressive behavior, intense fears, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, inability to concentrate, being easily startled, and physical symptoms, such as recurring stomach aches and sleep problems, may indicate a trauma response. Acting out and self-harming behaviors may surface if the trauma and grief continue to be unresolved. Even if the children appear to be handling things well in the early days, months or years, a trauma response may show itself later. Timing is different for everyone.

What to do: Talk honestly with children and teens. Honesty builds trust, and keeps them from finding out the truth of what happened at school, social media, or some other place.

- Openly acknowledge the trauma and what happened. Use simple language with younger children. Teens may have more capacity to process their experience conceptually. As recommended by the Dougy Center in Portland, "Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from using their limited energy and inner resources to figure out what happened."
- Try to control your response. If you're overcome by fear and sadness, your kids, even if they're very young, will pick up on that and it will make them feel even more scared. It's okay to share some of your feelings. You can let them know that you, too, feel upset by what happened.

¹ Any experience of someone dying can cause trauma, the level and timing of which can vary by individuals. It's important to acknowledge the possibility of trauma in children and teens, because this may cause them to be unable to process their grief until the impacts of trauma are addressed.

- Be willing to listen when the child or teen is ready to talk. Listening and reflecting back what you hear can help move their process forward. For example, “Wow, I hear that you are worried this will happen again to someone you love...”
- Children often process their experiences through play. They might, for example, create a scene with dolls or stuffed animals where someone gets murdered and dies. This is normal! A crayon drawing of a violent scene may look disturbing to you. This is normal as they try to make sense of what happened. Pay attention to their creative process, and listen for ways they are trying to make sense of their experience. Again, reflecting back what you see them do or say can be very powerful for their healing process and shows them you are paying attention.
- Help reestablish a sense of safety and security. Once children have experienced traumatic death, you can no longer honestly promise them anything about life. But you can tell them you are doing everything in your power to protect them and keep yourself safe. Keep routines consistent, because this also helps with kids feeling safe.
- Take their fears seriously, even if they seem silly to your adult mind. Once children express fears, they often feel some relief when these are acknowledged respectfully.
- Know that their emotions are likely to be volatile. It’s still important to set appropriate boundaries, because boundaries actually help children to feel safe.
- Be prepared to answer tough questions, such as about God and life after death. You can always say, “I don’t know for sure, but this is what I believe...” Also, children may ask the same questions over and over. Patience is important, because they are trying hard to grapple with something very difficult to understand.
- Seek professional help, especially from someone trained in trauma responses. Very effective tools exist that can assist in this slow, painful process of healing.
- To the best of your ability, give them some hope, perhaps by sharing with them that life brings some big challenges, but also lots of beauty, love, and adventure. Share an example of something positive, something you are looking forward to.

Community tragedies: Be available to your children to discuss what happened and listen to their fears and other feelings. Again, controlling your response in the presence of your children is really important, and seeking your own support system will help you to be more present with your children. Share any tips you have for dealing with your feelings. “I just keep reminding myself that my friends and family are safe and that there are lots of police, firemen, and others who are busy trying to protect us.” This will be easier to do if you have someone, such as a friend, clergy, or therapist, who can listen to your fears so you don’t pass them along to your child. It may be tempting to say, “Everything is fine. We’re far away from the explosions and nothing will happen to us.” But that can sound dismissive to your children if you aren’t also addressing their specific concerns. The best thing you can do is listen, acknowledge their feelings, and continually reassure them that you will do everything you can to keep them and yourself safe.

For schools: Sometimes violence and other traumas affect a whole school, or subset of kids. School personnel need to be aware of the trauma that children and teens are experiencing from violent death(s). The trauma may completely overshadow any grief response to the death(s). Addressing the trauma honestly and opening, is essential before they can deal with the grief in a healthy way. Bringing in professional experts, such as a crisis team, can make a huge difference in how the kids (and school personnel) move through the experience.

As is true with any death of a loved one, remembering the person who died can be very healing to children. Share stories, light a candle in remembrance, create an altar space in your home where they can put pictures and other mementos. Talk about the deceased by name with your kids. Seek professional help!