



A message to parents and teachers on how to talk to children about school shooting tragedies

February 15, 2018

As yet another tragedy claims innocent lives in one of our nation's schools, we are often left with more questions and a sense of helplessness in the face of unimaginable loss. This is also true of the children in our lives. In the days and weeks following a mass shooting, images and discussions will saturate the media without regard for younger listeners who will certainly ask questions. While disasters can take a toll on the lives of children, teachers, school leaders, and parents, they also provide an opportunity to reflect with our children in a way that helps them feel safe and hopeful.

If the children in your life raise questions, here are a few things to remember:

1. **Whenever possible, answer directly and honestly.** Authentic response in tragedy is so important to children and youth. Listen carefully and answer. They may want to know just one answer, one detail. Then ask if there are other questions and make it clear that you will answer, to the best of your ability, whatever they are asking.
2. **Answer differently for different ages.** Youth may have philosophical or psychological questions. Go with it when they ask about mental health, after life, violence or the impact of guns. Younger children may want to know concretes like what happened to the man who did the scary things in the school. Answer to their age level. (Example answer: He took himself away because he knew he did something very wrong. He will never come back again.)
3. **Offer hope.** Connecticut took many actions after the Newtown tragedy to make our state strong and safe. Security measures have been updated, mental health programs have been expanded, and other steps have been taken to keep the unstable from using guns. Schools, communities and families learn from tragedies. We can continue to grow even stronger through enhanced efforts around these measures.
4. **Provide a message of warmth and security.** Children need to know that home is safe, so show yours that you love them and will always protect them. There are no stronger barriers against the effects of violent and chaotic behavior than love and a sense of connection.
5. **Ensure that school is safe.** As a teacher, note strong school safety measures and explain that school is one of the safest places in our communities. As a parent, learn what steps your school has taken in regard to safety protocols, professional training, and building security for your own



comfort, participation and messaging. Parents and teachers alike can explain current school safety, so children can play and learn together, in a relaxed manner.

6. **Get back to normal.** Do not let a tragedy leak into play, routine and normal activity. A most healing activity is the comfort of routine with other children and adults. It is the familiarity of the daily way of moving through the day, with all its ups and downs that comforts like a blanket.
7. **Create ways to contribute to community.** Participation in a collective act often provides comfort. This might be something related to making the community stronger. Let children and youth determine responses. Ask what your child would like to do to honor victims, if he or she asks questions and shows interest. This might be a drawing, special walk or a letter. If possible, focus on your own town or family. Do the activity together so you can talk about it. Connection is a special balm against trauma.
8. **Know that losses can trigger other losses.** It is like a ball that keeps bouncing on issues of irretrievable loss. If you notice your child or someone else's appearing upset, give them room to talk. They may feel as if their own loss occurred yesterday.
9. **Direct children to a school or community counselor** who serves families if you perceive that the response they are showing might benefit from a professional conversation. Counseling can be tremendously helpful and nowadays is often short- term and focused. Signs might include trouble eating or sleeping, bad dreams, or aggressive play. Find out what is available at school and in your community for mental health support.
10. **Use play, sports, music and art.** Play takes the sharpness out of pain. Art, through drawing, sculpture, painting, music as well as poetry, help articulate many inner feelings with a distinct and separate form. Physical activity, repetition and rhythm are calming and help children maintain balance.
11. **Honor heroes.** There are many heroes during tragedies such as teachers, principals, police, children, and neighbors. And there are many heroes every day. Help children see them and recognize them in our daily lives. Ask children who their heroes are. Mention yours. Talk about heroes together.
12. **Emotions are like seasons.** They can stay underground, move like wind, swirl fast around, shift direction, and take shapes we are surprised by. It is alright to see this up and down change in something as unexpected and ineffable as a school shooting. This will calm down.



13. **Lock up ammunition.** Children and youth will experiment with guns if they can reach them. They may harm themselves or others, without intention. Protect them from such actions. Always use abundant caution.
14. **Honor humility and place.** Sometimes we do not have the answers. Tragedies are often unfurled chaos, fast and furious. We have many questions and few answers. People are gone and we cannot explain all that we would wish to master. It is OK to tell your child you do not know the answer.
15. **Remember the good, not just the bad.** Love is healing. Respect and dignity help scars even out and disappear.
16. **We are a stronger community, together.** Take care that no child is ever isolated. Build community in schools that assure open communication, counseling, and safe school climates with clear steps to reduce and intervene with harmful behaviors. Building empathy and inclusion is critical to the safety and well-being of our children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven Hernández".

Steven Hernández, Esq.
Executive Director
Connecticut Commission on Women, Children and Seniors