



# Nicoletti-Flater Associates, PLLP

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## What do I tell my kids?

In the wake of a tragedy such as Sandy Hook, parents, teachers, and other protectors of children are left with many questions, struggling their own shattered sense of security, challenged assumptions about safety, and heightened anxiety. While they seek to cope with their own reactions they are also charged with the psychological recovery of the children they care for. The following is intended to address some of the questions and concerns we often hear from caregivers.

### Question:

How can we communicate with our kids about what happened without scaring them?

### Answer:

Start by asking your kids what they already know about the event and clear up any misinformation they seem to have. For example, if they tell you that they think it was 10 people that were shooting, you can tell them there was actually one shooter. Once you clear up any misconceptions and get a sense of what they already know, follow up by asking them how they feel about what they've heard. This will allow you to get a sense of a) what they know and b) their emotional reactions. It will also help them to acknowledge both their intellectual state and their emotional state. Organizing both of these states will help to process reactions. If they have questions about what happened, answer them but be careful to offer only a small bit of additional information at a time and monitor their reactions. That little bit may be enough and overwhelming them with too much will only lead to increased anxiety. Additionally, limit children's access to media coverage of the event. The intensity of the coverage is often overwhelming for adults and therefore can easily become overwhelming for children.

### Question:

They keep asking me why this happened-what do I tell them?

### Answer:

Unfortunately, there are rarely satisfactory answers to why questions when it comes to tragic events. Therefore it is more productive to focus on the "what." More specifically, what you, as a protector, can do to help them manage any negative emotions they are experiencing such as fear or sadness. Be honest with them. Let them know that you don't know why this happened while also reflecting back the feelings they said they have. For example: I don't know why he shot those kids but you said that you were afraid/sad/etc. What can we do to make you feel less afraid/sad/etc.? If they aren't sure, you can offer several possible options or ask them to think about it and let you know when they think of something.



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## **Question:**

I can't stop thinking that this could have happened at my kid's school and they are afraid of this too. What do we do?

## **Answer:**

Experiencing fear is certainly a natural reaction to having basic assumptions shattered yet it is important to also realize that fear is contagious. Children learn from their parents and if their parents become afraid of the world, so will children. You can certainly validate your children's fears by letting them know that you are afraid as well; however, this must be followed up with solutions for managing this fear. Simply telling them not to worry is not helpful. Telling someone to change the way they feel hardly ever works. Think about the last time you were in an argument with someone and they said, "Just relax." Did you? Probably not. Validate for children that their feelings are normal while also empowering them to come up with a plan for how to rebuild their comfort zones is a better approach. Suggest that you help them talk with their teacher, a school counselor, or their principal to learn about their school's safety plan. Let them know that if they see or hear anything that makes them uncomfortable or frightened, they should let adults know. In addition, help them engage in "anticipatory thinking." For example, if they say they are afraid this might happen to them, talk to them about what to do if someone were to enter their classroom and start shooting. Teach safety skills without causing excessive anxiety. Help them to understand the difference between the possibility of something happening and the probability that it will happen to them. Let them know that these things don't happen very often and that millions of kids go to school every day without getting hurt; however, if it were to ever happen at their school, there are certain things they can do (e.g. run out of the room, hide, "play dead."). Make a game out of having them figure out a good hiding place whenever you are out. For example, walk them around their school and as you get to different locations, ask them to find a hiding spot; when you are at the mall, at a restaurant, at church, etc. ask them to do the same thing just to help them learn this skill even though you of course hope they never need it.

## **Question:**

My child seems to be regressing (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting); is experiencing physical symptoms (stomach aches), is having trouble sleeping/nightmares; or any number of other common symptoms of trauma. How do I help them?

## **Answer:**

With regard to bedtime symptoms (bed-wetting, nightmares, trouble sleeping, etc.) structure a bedtime routine that promotes a peaceful environment. Make sure that they have items that they find reassuring around them (a blanket, stuffed animal, or night-light) even if they had not needed these items prior to the event. Leave time to engage for at least a few minutes before they go to sleep to answer any questions or relieve any fears. Make sure to end the evening on a lighthearted note by reading a funny story, giving a big hug, sharing the best part of your day with each other, etc. Track any trauma symptoms and note: the frequency (how often do the symptoms occur), duration (how long do they last), intensity (how severe are the symptoms), and degree of interference (to what extent are the symptoms causing problems in functioning). If the symptoms do not seem to be decreasing over time or the symptoms are causing significant discomfort for them, you may want to seek additional mental health support.



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## **Question:**

My child seems to be acting more aggressively now. What do I do?

## **Answer:**

Like sleep disturbances and physical symptoms, anger is another common response to trauma. Any of these symptoms are exacerbated if they are currently experiencing more than one stressful event (parent's divorce, moving, death of a loved one or pet, etc.). Additional stressors will make it more likely that you might see a trauma response in connection with this event. Let your child know that while it is okay to feel angry, there are acceptable and not-acceptable ways of expressing that anger. Help them to develop appropriate outlets for their anger such as productive physical activity, art, or talking.

## **Question:**

How do we go back to things being normal?

## **Answer:**

Structure for children creates a sense of stability and comfort. Being able to predict when certain things will happen each day at fairly consistent times relieves anxiety that reinforces the belief that their needs will be met. This is true even when their world hasn't been shaken and becomes even more important when a trauma occurs. Reestablishing normal routines does not mean that you stop talking about what happened but it does mean they return to school; go to bed at an age appropriate time; do their homework and/or chores, etc. Encourage your child to seek out a teacher or school counselor if they have a continuing need to talk about the event or if they are having trouble coping. Make sure you engage in active communication with your child's teachers to let them know of any concerns you have regarding your child, any special needs they have, or any specific family values, traditions, beliefs, or customs you request that the school respect with regard to helping your child cope.