

Helping children manage distress in the aftermath of gun violence

Here are ways parents and caretakers can talk with children after experiencing a disturbing or violent event. Children (toddlers, kids, even older teens) look to adults to help them feel safe.

Consider the following tips for helping children manage their distress.



Check in and talk about their concerns

Talking to children is the first step to help them feel safe. Give extra time, attention, and patience (even an extra hug.)

- Start the conversation.
- Pick a time when children are comfortable talking: car rides, before dinner, or at bedtime.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view.
- Reinforce safety and security. Share how schools and communities will increase safety. Remind kids you are there for safety and support.



Keep routines

- Routines give children a sense of predictability and safety.
- Help maintain a calm environment at home.



Look for signs of stress or fear

- Children (and adults) have many emotions, including fear, shock, anger, grief, and anxiety after a violent event.
- Your children may have trouble sleeping, difficulty with school or home tasks, or changes in appetite and emotions. This is normal and should improve within 4-6 weeks if there are no other difficult events.
- Encourage children to share feelings by talking, writing, creating art such as drawing/painting pictures, or telling stories, etc.



Take news breaks

- Children get information from social media, TV, or newspapers. It's important to limit online time and TV news because constant exposure may increase anxiety and fear.
- Talk to them about what they read and calmly provide facts.



Children may hear adults

- Children may listen to adults talk. If they don't understand the conversation, they may "fill in the gaps," which can increase anxiety.



Take care of yourself

- Adults must take care of themselves, so they can take care of children.
- Be a model for handling difficult events. Take your own break, even if it's five minutes for deep breaths or a quick walk. Eating right and getting enough sleep is essential for everyone.



Help is available

- If you or your children need help or are overwhelmed, consider talking to an expert.
- A mental health professional can assist you and your children. It's important to get professional help if you or your children need it.

Additional Resources:

Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health 24/7 ACCESS Center at (800) 854-7771 crisis counseling, assessment, and referrals.