

After the Shooting: What Parents Can Do

As a parent, one of your most important concerns is the safety and wellbeing of your child. When a horrific act of violence happens, such as this shooting at Virginia Tech University, you may be wondering how you can help. Children and teens will react differently. Some will seem to come through the experience unscathed. Later, some may begin to have delayed reactions. Others will react strongly from the start, even though they may have suffered little loss or any sense of threat. However, most children and teens have normal and typical reactions to these abnormal circumstances

After the shooting, your children may have...

- a need to talk about it.
Your children may repeat stories regarding this event many times. Even shy ones will open up to strangers about what they saw on television, heard from others, and felt about the victims. Many will worry about what happened to others and will ask many questions.
- nightmares and trouble sleeping.
Your children may be afraid to go to sleep or wake up frightened from bad dreams.
- concerns about being alone.
Some children are afraid of being left alone anywhere, even if it's only in another room at home. Yours may cling to you and may even want to sleep with you at night. They may be afraid of leaving home to go to school.
- worries and fears.
Children may pay closer attention to the news. Most will be much more vigilant about the possible dangers in our community. They may become apprehensive on everyday trips and in doing typical errands. And if they perceive any threat or hint of aggression, they may immediately believe that another shooting is on the way.
- vivid memories of the shooting.
Many young people will picture in their minds detailed and powerful scenes from televised reports of the shooting. It's almost as if they have their own internal videotape that replays their experiences whenever there's a reminder of the shooting. They may write poetry or draw pictures of the scene. Young children may act out the event in their play.
- trouble sitting still.
Your children may now be more active, have problems paying attention, and be more impatient.
- upset feelings or no feelings at all.
Many children will become much more sensitive. They will become upset easily and become angry quickly. But others may seem to become numb or unfeeling. They may not show any sadness or anger, but they also may not show any joy either. It's as if they are closing themselves off from any future hurt or threat.
- physical problems.
Your child may suffer from headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and fatigue.

These are just some of the common, temporary reactions children can have to a shooting. Keep in mind that these are normal responses to an abnormal event. Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to help your children through these difficult times.

You can help your children by...

- listening.
It may be painful, but the best thing you can do for children is to listen to them talk about the shooting. Younger children may be drawing pictures of the shooting or acting it out in their play. Talking, drawing and play-acting are healthy and natural ways for children to work through their reactions.
- comforting.
Feel free to hold and comfort your children more during this time. They are reaching out to you for security right now, and a little extra love and affection won't spoil them.
- reassuring.
You can also reassure your children that they are now safe. Remind them that you and other caring adults are taking precautions to protect them.
- teaching.
Tragedies are opportunities for children to learn the most important lessons of life – what it means to be part of a loving family and caring community. Take advantage of this chance to teach your children these basics.
- praising.
Children often show strengths, such as thoughtfulness, kindness and hope, in troubled times. You can point with pride to their feelings of compassion and concern. Be generous with your praise.
- not being over-protective.
This may be the most difficult for you to do, but you must fight the temptation to over-protect your children. It may be very hard even to let them out of your sight, but it's important that they return to a regular routine as soon as possible.
- being a good example.
Actions speak louder than words, and by your actions, you can set an example for your children of how to handle these reactions in a productive way.
- encouraging children to help.
You may encourage your children to offer help to others. For example, they may want to donate toys to the domestic violence shelter or send a message of support to the victims.
- seeking help if your children are suffering severe problems.
If your children have had serious losses, such as the death of a loved one, or the destruction of a home or farm, they may need more help. See a professional if they are having extreme reactions to the shooting, such as repeated nightmares, flashbacks, crying spells, behavior problems, and panic reactions. Talk to your child's pediatrician, teacher, or school counselor for a recommendation.

Lennie Echterling, Ph.d.
Anne Stewart, Ph.d.
James Madison University