

How to Talk to Your Kids about the Orlando Shooting

Don't ignore their anxiety, but be reassuring

For kids, Orlando is usually known as the home of the so-called “happiest place on earth,” Disney World, but that has been the opposite of true since the shooting at a gay nightclub in that city on the early morning of June 12. Because kids may have already heard of Orlando, it’s possible they are alerted more to events there than usual and have questions for their parents.

While it’s natural to want to shield kids, especially young ones from horrible and terrifying events, parents should be ready to answer any questions their children have, say child development experts. This is a very tricky story to tell and it’s O.K. to say that you don’t have all the answers. It’s also perfectly natural to be upset and sad, but experts suggest that you keep as calm a demeanor as you can manage when talking to them, because kids very much pick up their cues from parents.

Experts always encourage parents to trust their instincts. Kids vary in levels of anxiety, and vulnerability. You know your kid and what they can handle better than anyone.

Tragically, this is not the first big attack that parents may have had cause to talk to their kids about. After the attacks in Paris in November 2015, TIME asked prominent child development experts for guidance on how to discuss these event with their children. That advice, below is relevant again today.

For pre-school kids: This is the only age which experts recommend trying to avoid the subject a little. Children younger than five tend to confuse facts with fears, says Harold Koplewicz of the Child Mind Institute, so limiting access to news and watching what you say is advisable. Answer questions, but carefully. “Remember, you don’t have to give them more details than they ask for.”

For elementary school aged kids: most psychologists suggest letting the young ones lead the way. “If the kids are aware of what happened, a parent’s discussion should be focused on the child’s well-being,” says psychologist Paul Coleman, author of *Finding Peace When Your Heart Is in Pieces*. “The details of who, what, when, and why should guide the discussion to the child’s deeper (perhaps unstated) concerns.”

You do not need to delve into details like the exact number of people who died or how, and try not to be overly dramatic or use frightening words, says Coleman. “If you are very upset and they notice, reassure them you will be fine but you are just sad at the news.”

But don't avoid or disregard your kids' questions either; older children (aged 6 to 11) are comforted by facts. "For kids this age, knowledge can be empowering and helps relieve anxiety," says Koplewicz.

Try not to dismiss their fears as foolish, although therapists say it's fine to point out that events like these are rare and unlikely to happen to the kids. Their fears are natural. Children at this age are egocentric and believe that any bad thing that happens anywhere is heading their way.

"Then let your children know that they are safe and loved," advises Coleman. You can gently point out, with some degree of honesty that such attacks are rare, that the bad guys are gone and the chances of such an attack happening to them are quite slim.

For middle school aged kids: Don't assume, just because your kids are a little older now, that you know how they feel. Ask them if they've heard about the attacks and what they think. Psychologists suggest that being able to answer all their questions is not as key as just being around to help them absorb the news somewhere they feel safe.

"Answer their questions simply," says Coleman, "and reassure them that they are safe and that adults are working hard to prevent things like this from happening again." Kids at this age see things in terms of good guys and bad guys. They might be interested in more of the details, but experts still advise keeping those to a minimum.

And don't panic if they seem blasé or indifferent about the attacks; all kids process scary information differently. "Children react to disturbing events in different ways," says Koplewicz. "Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. It's important to let your child know that it is normal to express things in different ways—for example, a person may feel sad but not cry."

Encourage them to talk and express any fears, especially if they have been involved in any other scary or violent incidents recently. If appropriate, experts say, you might like to review any safety plans you have with them, if your home has fire escapes, if you have a gathering place in case of emergency or how their mobile phones are primarily meant to be used to keep in touch with them.

For high school kids, who are probably reading a lot about the events on social media, and hearing about it from their friends, it might be worth explaining in a bit more detail what we know and what we don't. These are complex issues and not likely to be solved soon, so they may as well be thinking about issues they will be facing in the years to come.

"It's very typical for teens to say they don't want to talk," says Koplewicz. "Try to start a conversation while you are doing an activity together, so that the conversation does not feel too intense or confrontational."

Experts also recommend that while it's great to radiate calm, it's also helpful to share your own feelings on the issue, as part of keeping the discussion going. "Reassurances that they won't ever get hurt or lose someone in a terrorist attack will not be believed," says Coleman. "Speak to them in terms of probabilities."

And by all means talk to them about what to do in the case of an emergency, where they should go if they can't get home or who they should call if they can't reach you.

Finally, when the time comes, therapists say this is a good opportunity to talk to high school kids about violence, and its effects and other ways to solve problems or have your voice heard.

If kids are still afraid after your reassurances, Coleman has a handy acronym of things to do: **SAFE**

S: Search for hidden questions or fears. Ask what else is on their mind about what happened, what their friends say about it and what their biggest worry is right now. "The goal is to not assume your child is okay because it would make you—the parent—more at ease to believe that is so," he says. "Some children may not speak up about their fears or may be unable to articulate them without a parent's willingness to ask questions."

A: Act. Keep routines going—homework, bedtime rituals and so on—because they're reassuring and distracting. "It is a good time to have them do kind things for others," says Coleman. Little things like helping an elderly neighbor, or opening a door for a stranger reminds them that there are kindnesses in this world. This reduces the sense of helplessness.

F: Feel feelings. "Let them know their feelings make sense," says Coleman. "Saying 'There is nothing to worry about,' teaches them that you may not be the person to speak to about their fears." Let them talk it out and show that you understand.

E: Ease Minds. After you're sure they've talked through their fears, you can assure them of their safety. "Reassure them that there are good people trying to help others and prevent future attacks," says Coleman.

The No. 1 thing most experts agree on is that your child needs is your time. "The best thing you can do as a parent is be available," says Koplewicz. "Just spending time with him and reassuring him that an event like this is unusual can make a huge difference."

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