**Yet Another School Shooting…**

**Talking with Our Kids**

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“This is a tragic day, one that I had hoped would never, ever be part of my experience,”  
Reynolds School District Superintendent, Linda Florence, Troutdale, Oregon.  
~ From NBC News, June 10, 2014

This morning in our own backyard, another school shooting. Another victim.

A student murdered in school, just days before graduation. As Reynolds’ graduating seniors planned to celebrate the end of their high school years, symbolically stepping into young adulthood, this day will be indelibly marked in a very different way: As their official loss of innocence. *It can happen here.*

Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Oregon now joins the macabre list: reportedly the 74th school shooting in the U.S. since the December 14, 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy.

Much has been written about the climate in which such tragedies occur, how to prevent them, and what role access to firearms plays. Much more will be said about prevention, mental illness, and social contributors to violence. And we have to ask: How do these events in schools impact the psyches of our youth, and just what, exactly, can we say to offer them any kind of comfort? How do we reassure them of their own safety?

At The Dougy Center in Portland, Oregon, we’ve provided grief support groups for children, teens, young adults and their parents or adult caregivers since 1982. In 1988 we started our first “Healing after a Violent Death or Murder” group, and sadly, have seen the numbers of children and youth impacted by violent death grow over these decades. We were called in to respond in communities after the Thurston High school murders, following 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Newtown, Connecticut murders, and to countless local and national man-made tragedies where children died, witnessed murders, or lost their own family members to violence. We’ve advised the FBI’s Rapid Deployment Team and the National Transportation Safety Board’s Family Assistance Program, two important programs detailing the best practices and procedures for responding to the needs of children and families reeling from the deaths of loved ones in mass casualties.

Based on our experience, here are some things for adults to keep in mind as you struggle with how to talk with children and teens following these tragic events:
With younger children:

Don’t project your fears onto your children. They take their cues from the adults around them.

You can’t hear the news about children being murdered without thinking about how you’d feel if they were your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors. The outpouring of care and empathy for the families who lost loved ones will be powerful, and…we all know it could have been our friends, our child, our family members who died or were injured.

Identifying with the senselessness and randomness makes us all feel more vulnerable. But we should remember that children don’t always see things the same way that adults do, and it won’t be helpful to them for us to fall apart. They need to see that we care, that we feel terrible about this tragedy, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. They will take their cues from our behavior.

It’s okay to show emotion. We ought to model to children that feeling sad and upset is normal after tragedies. But we don’t want to overwhelm them with our emotions, or put them in the position of having to ‘parent’ the adults around them. Make sure you also model taking care of yourself, by sharing with trusted and supportive adult friends, eating (and drinking) healthfully.

Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the tragedy over and over.

Over-exposure to the graphic and emotional news can be overwhelming for children. Some children who repeatedly watched the footage of planes crashing into the towers on 9/11 thought it was happening again and again. Some children (and some adults) may have difficulty getting graphic scenes and images out of their minds. Too much exposure can fuel their fear, so don’t let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.

Understand that you can’t completely shield them from what happened.

It would be next to impossible to hide these events from children, as much as we wish we could. You might be able to shield your own child in your home, for example, by not turning on (or owning) a television, but you can’t protect your children from hearing about it from other kids. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don’t “need” to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.

That said, you don’t need to give them more information than they can handle, or more than they’re asking for. A simple, “Did they talk about what happened in _____ today at school?” would be a good starter. They need to know that you’re not trying to hide the truth from them, that you’re open to talking about it, but that you’re also not forcing them to do so.
Model truth-telling and build trust with your children by letting them hear things, even hard things, from you directly.

In over 30 years of providing grief support to thousands of children and teens at The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families, we have never heard a child or teen say, “I’m glad I was lied to.” Many, however, struggle with anger and lack of trust toward parents or other adults who lied to them. When we don’t tell the truth, they learn that we cannot be trusted. As difficult as it can be at times, and as horrendous as the truth may be, children want, need, and deserve the truth.

**Here are some principles to keep in mind:**

**There is no one typical reaction one can or should expect from children or teens.**

Their responses will vary all over the map, from seeming disinterest to nightmares, eating issues and panic attacks. How any specific child or teen will respond will depend on their age, previous experience with death and loss, their personality style. (Fearful children will tend to worry; quiet children may keep their feelings to themselves; those who want to appear unfazed may evidence a sense of bravado or lack of caring). Of course, the children and teens most directly affected – those who had a family member die; those who witnessed the carnage; those who had friends die – will tend to have longer-term reactions and needs. Watch for changes in behavior, or concerning trends. While it would be normal to have heightened anxiety and sleeplessness, any concerning behavior or troubling symptoms should be taken seriously, and if warranted, professional help sought.

**Many children and teens will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.**

Understandably. So will many adults.

While we can’t guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. We’ve had to digest the reality that children in school, shoppers at a mall, runners in a marathon, have all been targeted. What makes these murders even more terrifying is that they highlight not only that it can happen anywhere, but that it has happened, in several pretty normal, ordinarily safe places.

As we cope with trying to come to terms with these senseless events, how to explain such things to our children and keep them safe, let us not forget the families and friends of those killed. They have long, difficult and lonely journeys ahead. Their lives truly will never be the same. They need our support, not just in these initial days of shock and disbelief, but long-term, long after the funerals are over, the tuna casseroles consumed, and the rest of the world has moved on.

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