

Emerging Minds Families

Talking to children about violent events

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

Acts of violence are increasingly being brought into our homes through all forms of media. In recent years, some of those violent acts have happened on Australian soil, which can be frightening and shocking for all of us. While many adults and children are disturbed when these events happen, adults tend to be able to rationalise these events and put them into perspective more easily than children can.

Sometimes, when bad things happen in the world, we may feel unsure about how to explain these events to the children in our life, or even if we should mention them at all. Most adults want to protect children from scary events, but in today's ever-connected world, it is not possible to keep all media and conversations from reaching them. Most children will end up either hearing about the event or seeing news footage, whether intentionally or accidentally in passing.

It can be difficult to explain acts of violence to children and it is important to be aware that children do not have to personally witness an event to feel scared, angry, confused or overwhelmed. Depending on their age and developmental stage, they may not understand that footage being shown on TV is not the event happening over and over again. Children who are very young may not understand the images they are seeing or what they mean, but they are sensitive to what their parents or carers are feeling and can pick up on their distress or anxiety.

Lots of parents think that talking about traumatic or scary events with children will upset them, but for most children, talking about an event will not cause them to develop issues. Instead, it can be a healthy and helpful way for them to process their thoughts and feelings, as well as a way for you to correct any misconceptions they may have picked up from only hearing or seeing part of the story.



Talking to children about the event will also give you an understanding of what they already know and will help them share any worries they may have, instead of being left to manage feelings of distress on their own. If children are left alone to manage their feelings without adult support, their worries can become much bigger and scarier to them. Although it is natural for you to want to protect children from frightening or dangerous events in the world, a better option is to create a space where they can share any concerns with you and where you can discuss how to deal with these feelings together. This provides an opportunity to help reduce anxiety and fear, and for you to model resilience and strategies for positive coping.

How do I know if my children are OK?

Parents or carers often focus on the impact of traumatic events on their children, and put their own wellbeing second. However, how you manage your own feelings of distress and sadness has implications for your children's wellbeing. It is important that you look after your own needs, so you are better able to support and care for the children that rely on you.

After a frightening or traumatic event occurs, the majority of children will experience some initial distress. This may take the form of:

- intense emotions that change rapidly
- overwhelming feelings of sadness or fear
- intrusive thoughts or memories
- anxiety or new fears
- increased aggression or anger
- not wanting to go to school or see friends
- refusing to leave home
- trouble concentrating
- increased fussiness or clinginess.

While these feelings of distress can be uncomfortable and frightening, they are the brain's way of trying to process the event and make sense of what has happened. Most children will return to their usual selves in the weeks and months after the event, supported by reassurance and stability from you and other key adults in their lives (like educators, sporting coaches, aunts and uncles, etc.).

Regardless of whether you and your family personally experienced the event, your children will need reassurance that they are safe and loved. You can reassure them through both words and actions. Try having a conversation following the guidelines in the next section, giving them hugs and words of encouragement, continuing a stable and regular household routine, encouraging them to play and go to school, and doing calming activities like reading or crafts. All children will need care, affection, and emotional connection with their parents and carers to feel safe after a frightening event. Older children and teenagers will also benefit from positive friendships, where they can discuss the event and be supported in their feelings.

A small percentage of children may continue to experience difficulties. This is more likely if you or your children experienced the event personally, knew people who did, or have experienced an event like it in the past. Pre-existing mental or physical health difficulties can also increase the possibility that you or your child may experience some ongoing distress. Speak to your GP or health professional if feelings of sadness, anger, hopelessness, or anxiety do not resolve within a few weeks or interfere significantly with your or your children's day-to-day life and/or functioning.

Talking about acts of violence

The following are some guidelines to assist adults to think about, plan and initiate conversations with a child about acts of violence. Conversations, if held sensitively, are not likely to traumatise a child but will give them a chance to air concerns, help them process their feelings and reassure them they are safe.

- 1. Before you start, check in with yourself.** How are you feeling? Are you ready to talk about this? Are you ready to answer questions openly and honestly? If you are not feeling up to it, wait until you are, but remember – a little bit of anxiety or nervousness is normal. Do your best to remain calm and in control, as this will help calm your children too.
- 2. Is this the right moment?** There will never be a 'perfect' moment for a hard conversation, but this is not a reason not to have them. Try to choose a quiet moment where there aren't many other people around and you have time to spend with them afterwards if they need it. Ask them how they are feeling at the moment and if you can have a small talk with them. Reassure them they are not in trouble, as this may cross some children's minds when an adult comes to talk with them seriously. If they don't want to talk, leave it, and try again another time.
- 3. Approach the conversation gently by first finding out what they know.** Ask them if they have heard about the event, and if so, what they know about it. Finding out what they know is an opportunity to correct any misconceptions and fill in any gaps you may need to.
- 4. Don't assume children know that it's OK to talk to you about their feelings.** Lots of children don't want their parents to be burdened by their distress, so they learn to hide it to ensure their parents are ok. Make sure you let your children know that any feeling is OK to feel, and it's OK to tell you what those feelings are. Accept their feelings without judgment and don't say things like, 'You shouldn't feel like that' or 'Be brave', which deny the reality of their distress.
- 5. Let your child lead the conversation and monitor how they respond.** It is OK to leave the conversation for later if they get tired or upset. You may have a number of smaller conversations over a period of time, rather than all at once. If they don't want to talk, don't make them, but try again another time.

6. Give them honest, simple and age-appropriate information about what happened, focusing on the effort that is being taken to help others. Make sure you stick to the facts of what happened and don't speculate about another attack or incident. Don't deny that what happened is serious or dangerous or won't ever happen again, but put it into the context of the wider world and discuss what individuals can do to protect themselves if something bad happens. This can also be a good time to talk about all the people who help other people in times like this; people like first responders, nurses, and everyday passers-by who help other people. Remind your children that if something scary happens, all they have to do is look around to find more people who help others than who hurt them. Ask your child to make a list with you of all the 'helpers' you can both think of.

7. Let them ask whatever questions they need. Answer honestly, but without graphic or violent details. It is also OK if you don't have all the answers to your child's questions. You can validate their curiosity and concern by saying something like, 'That's a great question, but I don't know the answer right now. I will try to find out more and get back to you as soon as I can.' This way, you show them that you respect their feelings and thoughts, and that you are willing to help them learn more.

8. Remind them that this is a rare occurrence, and it's OK to be upset about what happened. Your child is likely to be more upset if they were personally affected by the event or knew someone who was. They may need extra support from you in this time, and may not want to talk about it. Remind them that you are there to speak with at any time they want.

9. Avoid negative and judgmental language. It is natural to be angry and want to blame someone for the event. However, children can easily pick up prejudices from the conversations of adults around them. Children need to know that we cannot blame an entire cultural, ethnic or religious group for the actions of a few individuals.

10. Try to follow the conversation up with a calming, fun activity, like drawing, watching a movie together, going for a walk or reading a story. This helps build feelings of safety and connection, and is a chance for children to calm down if the conversation has brought up any feelings of sadness or fear.

11. Don't worry if in the days and weeks following the event and your conversations, children act out or draw pictures of violent events. This is part of their attempts to understand what has happened. However if children persist in drawing

or acting out scenes of violence, it can be a sign that their distress is not getting better. If this is the case you can join your child in their play to explore what is going on, to see if you can help them to make sense and meaning of the event. Or if you feel concerned, seek further advice from your child's school, or see your GP.

For further information you might want to watch this brief video where Andrea Murray from the Queensland Centre for Perinatal & Infant Mental Health discusses the importance of stories and play for children after a disaster, and how adults can support this.

[▶ WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE](#)

Note

Some children, especially younger children or children with developmental difficulties, may not be able to express what they are thinking and feeling. Some children may also not be comfortable putting their inner thoughts into words.

It can be useful for children to draw their ideas and feelings instead. Ask them if they are able to draw what they are feeling, or whereabouts in their body they feel it. Give them a range of creative materials to draw or create, and praise their efforts.



Remember during and after your conversation(s) to:

- **be a good listener.** Listen more than you talk, especially with older children.
- **maintain a normal routine.** Children may be upset and not want to sleep alone or go places without you. Do your best to accompany them if they ask you and remind them that you are always nearby. Make sure they go back to school and do normal activities.
- **monitor exposure to the news and images of the event.** It can be hard for younger children to distinguish between 'what happened then' and 'what is happening now' if they see images on the TV.
- **observe the child.** Children, especially younger ones, often express emotional states through their behaviour. If a child remains very upset, or has trouble eating or sleeping for more than a few days, they may need further advice and support from a GP.
- **be aware if the child is at increased risk of traumatic reactions.** Children who experienced the event personally or lost a loved one, have a past history of trauma or loss, or who have experienced physical or mental illness may be at increased risk of distress and require monitoring and extra support.



Supporting children at different ages

The following examples are age-appropriate responses for children to assist you in explaining acts of violence:

- **Preschool age (2-5 years) children** need brief and simple explanations and reminders they are safe. For example:

'Someone decided to hurt other people, which was a very bad thing to do, and it made lots of people very sad. Some people got very hurt, but there are lots of police officers and doctors working now to make sure they get better and that everyone is safe.'
- **Younger school-age (5-8 years) children** may need help distinguishing between fantasy and reality and may need more reassurance that they are safe. For example:

'Someone hurt some people yesterday. Most people in the world are good people, but sometimes people do bad things and no one understands why they happen. It doesn't mean it will ever happen to you, but remember there are always more good people working to keep people safe than there are people looking to hurt others. There are lots of police officers, doctors, and everyday people working together right now to help the people who were hurt.'
- **Older school-age (8-12 years) children** may ask more questions and require more information about what happened. Make sure to give them opportunities to ask questions and express what they are thinking and feeling. For example:

'There was an attack in [place] and some people got hurt. Is there anything you want to know?'

AVAILABLE HERE

**More resources
on supporting
children during
traumatic events**

