

School Violence - What Should I Tell My Children?

Learn how to hold frank but reassuring discussions with children about school violence.

Understand symptoms of anxiety problems and warning signs of potential violence in children. News reports of school violence leave adults horrified, shaken and anxious. Imagine how they can affect young children, who may see frightening images repeatedly replayed on television but not fully understand them. Or teens, who may be faced with metal detector checks and unsettling thoughts about their own school's safety.

Michael Tiede, L.P., a licensed psychotherapist for children and adolescents at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., explores how parents and other adults can talk to children of different ages about school violence.

Should adults simply tell children that school violence won't happen in their community?

That's probably not an appropriate message to convey. We've seen that school violence can happen virtually anywhere, even in schools that may seem extremely safe. Unfortunately, a message like this can also give children a false sense of security, and they may not be as vigilant about unsafe situations as they should be. And many children do worry that a shooting or other violent event may happen in their school, so you should validate and acknowledge their feelings. Blanket statements that it won't happen risk minimizing their fears and shutting down conversation.

How do you reassure children about school violence while acknowledging that it can happen?

You can focus on messages about safety. You can honestly tell children that school violence is unlikely to happen, that it's rare. And you can discuss safety measures that are in place to protect them at school, Talk to them about how school personnel, such as their teachers and principals, are trained to keep them safe. Let them know that schools take concerns about violence or safety very seriously. You can also help children feel a sense of control by teaching them to report concerns or incidents. Adolescents and teens can be empowered by learning conflict-resolution skills and participating in anti-violence programs.

If your child doesn't bring up the issue of school violence or express worries, should you just ignore it too?

It's usually up to the adult to initiate conversations about school violence. Just because your child isn't openly talking about school violence doesn't mean that he or she isn't worried about it. For one thing, younger children may not be able to verbalize their fear easily. They may act it out in behavior or play. And older children, who are notorious for clamming up around adults as it is, may be hesitant to raise serious or emotional issues. In fact, some children think about school violence more fatalistically than adults do. It's not uncommon to find out months after the news coverage ends that your child was very worried in the wake of a violent incident.

When is the best time to talk to children about school violence?

Too often, discussions arise only after an incident is reported in the news. But safety and school violence should be topics of family discussion through the various stages of childhood development. Don't reserve discussion only for times when a serious incident occurs.

How do you engage a young child in a conversation about school violence?

Young children, such as those in kindergarten through fifth grade, may have trouble understanding the concept of violence. Because of that, you need to talk to them in a way they can relate to. It may be a less direct approach. You can talk to them about being teased, what's happening on the school bus, about people being "mean," or if they're concerned about strangers coming to their school to hurt them or their friends or teachers.

What about talking to older children about school violence?

With older children, such as those in middle school or high school, you can talk about school violence in a more direct way — making sure it's appropriate for your particular child. You can ask them if they ever worry about school violence, for instance. You can ask them how they feel when school violence makes the news. With teenagers who may not be as open, you can ask them what their friends are talking about or how teachers are addressing school safety, as sort of a backdoor way to get them to talk about the issue.

When reports of school violence occur, what should you do for your children?

For younger children, the discussion should focus on safety and how adults are doing everything they can to protect them. With older children, you can help them understand what's happened. Reinforce the idea that serious school violence is rare. Also, without alarming them, remind them to be aware of possible signs of impending violence and to report any concerns to school authorities. And it's OK to let them know that you feel upset when you see violence in schools, too. But because a child will pick up on parental anxiety like a sponge, it's important to remain calm and reassuring.

Should children watch television news coverage of school violence incidents?

It depends on their age and developmental level. Young children, such as preschoolers, often interpret the news differently than adults do. For instance, some studies show that young children often don't realize that the same incident is constantly replayed on the news — they believe it's different incidences of violence, which can lead them to think that violence is common. Children of any age, and even adults, can have traumatic reactions to violent or shocking images, especially those that show frightened or injured school children. Watching footage from the scene of an incident can be too intense. Even older children should limit viewing of such news. Remind them that early news coverage may be inaccurate and sensationalistic because the facts aren't all known. Consider watching the news together so that you can discuss it.

Is school violence really increasing or does it just seem that way?

School violence has always existed in some form or other. Playground fights and teasing have seemed almost a rite of passage for school children, although we know now that behavior like bullying and hazing can be very harmful. In fact, school children are more likely to be involved in fist fights or subjected to bullying or hazing than to school shootings. However, when school shootings do occur, they get a tremendous amount of publicity, which promotes the misconception that they occur more often than they actually do. In reality, children are more likely to be victims of homicide outside of school. And because Clinton Community Schools have adopted safety procedures, school violence can often be prevented.

If you would like more information you will find additional school safety resources**American Counseling Association - Resources for Crisis Counseling**

Resources from the association of professional counselors.

American School Counselor Association - School Shooting Resources

ASCA has released a series of tips as well as resources and publications for families and communities across the nation.

National Association for School Psychologists - Crisis and Safety Resources

Crisis resources including Reinforcing School Safety from the organization that represents and supports school psychology.