NMVC
National Mass Violence Center
Providing Resources to Victims, Survivors, & Those Who Serve Them

National Mass Violence Center
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
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Talking With Children and Teens About Mass Violence

A tip sheet for adults to assist in having conversations with children and teens who did not personally experience a mass violence incident.

Communities are likely to include children who were not directly involved in a mass violence incident. These children or teens might ask questions that adults struggle to answer. A child's questions might surface around safety drills, memorial dates, news of a mass violence incident elsewhere, court dates, online content — or for no visible reason at all.

Guiding Principles

√ DO:	X DON'T:
• Ask children or teens what they've already heard first.	• Share graphic details, casualty specifics, or weapon information.
• Let the child's question set the scope for your answer.	• Use the name of the person who caused the harm or speculate about motive.
• Be honest and age appropriate. Say "I don't know" when you don't.	• Assume a child has no personal connection to what happened.
• Validate whatever they feel — including curiosity, or nothing at all.	• Promise that nothing like this will ever happen again.
• Focus on safety, helpers, and what children and teens themselves can do.	• Turn one child's question into an unplanned group discussion.
	• Let a rumor stand uncorrected because correcting it feels awkward.

Before You Answer, Ask Yourself Three Questions

1. **What are they asking?** "Did someone die here?" is a different question from "Why did he do it?" or "Am I safe?"
2. **What do they already know?** Ask first. It lets you correct misinformation and avoid introducing unsolicited details.
3. **What might be the underlying reason for the child or teen's questions?** Often times, children are wanting to know if a violent event could ever happen to them — even if they do not ask that exact question.

A useful opening: "That's a good question. Before I answer, tell me what you've heard — I want to be sure I understand what you're asking."

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Reassurance Without False Promises

Avoid

- "That will never happen here."
- "You don't need to worry about that."

Try

- "This is very rare. A lot of adults work every day to help keep this school safe, and I'm one of those adults."
- "You're allowed to feel worried. Worrying doesn't mean something bad is going to happen."

Then give the child or teen something to do — agency reduces fear more than reassurance alone. Tell an adult if you hear someone talk about hurting themselves or others; a threat is never a secret you keep for a friend; you know what to do in a drill; you can step away from the news when it's too much.

Focus on the People Affected, Not the Person Who Caused Harm

Curiosity about the person who carried out the mass violence incident is normal and not, by itself, a warning sign. Don't use the person's name, describe weapons or planning, speculate about motive, or make the person sound powerful or interesting.

Try

- "This is very rare. A lot of adults work every day to help keep this school safe, and I'm one of those adults."
- "You're allowed to feel worried. Worrying doesn't mean something bad is going to happen."

If curiosity becomes fixation — collecting content about the person, expressing admiration or identification — consult your counselor or administrator. That is an opportunity to provide support, not discipline.

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By Age

Grades K – 2

What They May Understand

Children in this age range tend to think in ways that are literal and concrete. They may not grasp that it happened once and is over — some think it is happening now. Concern is immediate: am I safe, is my grown-up safe?

Try Saying

- "Something very sad happened here."
- "It is over. It is not happening now."
- "The grown-ups here have a job to keep you safe."

Watch For

New fears; clinginess; regression such as bed wetting or baby talk; stomachaches; trouble sleeping; danger themes in play; startling easily.

Grades 3 – 5

What They May Understand

Children in this age range understand that the mass violence incident is past and permanent. They begin to realize adults can't guarantee safety. They might be carrying information from their peers — some accurate, some not.

Try Saying

- "You can ask me anything. If I don't know, I'll say so."
- "Some of what you hear from other kids may not be right."
- "Feeling okay doesn't mean you don't care."

Watch For

School reluctance; frequent nurse visits; nightmares; appetite changes; worrying about family safety; checking exits or reacting strongly to noises.

Grades 6 – 8

What They May Understand

Children in this age range typically understand what happened and are beginning to ask why. They might encounter information about the mass violence incident through group chats, social media, and/or web-based mediums. Rumors and graphic content tend to circulate. These children may test who will be honest.

Try Saying

- "I'll be straight with you about what I know and what I don't."
- "A lot of what's online about this may be wrong or made to get clicks."
- "You can have questions even when nobody has answers."

Watch For

Preoccupation with the event or the person who caused harm; seeking or sharing graphic content; irritability; pulling away from friends and activities; declining schoolwork; new risk-taking behaviors (for example, drug or alcohol use).

Grades 9 – 12

What They May Understand

Teens might hold grief, anger, and political disagreement all at once. They might express frustration with evasive answers. Some will feel an inherited responsibility; some want action, others want distance. All are legitimate.

Try Saying

- "I don't have all the answers, and I'm not going to pretend to."
- "People here feel very differently about it, and that's real."
- "Asking for help is a sign of strength."

Watch For

Withdrawal; low mood or anxiety; drop in attendance or performance; drug or alcohol use; expressions of hopelessness; frequently watching online coverage.

When policy questions come up with older students — guns, security, mental health — acknowledge that people can disagree on these topics and help them find accurate information rather than steering them toward your own position.

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In the Classroom

A question in front of a group rarely calls for a full discussion. Acknowledge briefly, then move it to a private follow-up: "That's a real question and I'm glad you asked. Something serious happened here and a lot of people were affected. I want to give it more time than we have right now — find me after class."

Afterward, tell your counselor or administrator what was asked and what you said, and consider a brief note home — some families have made deliberate decisions about what their child knows. Keep the message consistent across staff so students don't collect multiple different answers.

Drills, Memorial Dates, and Media

- **Drills:** give advance notice, when possible, frame them like fire drills, and build in a check-in afterward.
- **Memorial dates:** students who weren't there may be unsure they have a right to feel anything. Participating is welcome; not participating is fine.
- **Mass violence elsewhere:** expect a wave of local questions. Keep routines steady and limit media exposure.
- **Media and rumors:** ask what they've seen before correcting it, discourage sharing graphic footage (real people from this community are in it), and encourage breaks.

Some Additional Tips for Supporting Children

Let questions lead; answer what was asked, then check. Keep routines steady. Expect questions at bedtime and in the car. Watch what's playing on the TV, computer, or radio in the background. Tell the school if your child has been asking a lot or if there is family history, so staff can respond thoughtfully.

When Someone May Need Additional Support

Most temporary changes ease within a few weeks. Connect a child with a counselor or mental health professional if changes are intense, persist beyond a few weeks, or interfere with school, sleep, eating, relationships, or daily functioning — particularly persistent anxiety or panic, nightmares, withdrawal, hopelessness, substance use, avoidance that disrupts daily life, or preoccupation with the person who caused harm.

If Someone Talks About Hurting Themselves or Others

Take it seriously, stay with them, and follow your district's crisis and threat assessment protocols. For immediate safety concerns, contact emergency services. In the U.S., the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available by call or text at 988.

A Final Thought

These children inherit the mass violence story without the memory, which means they depend on the adults around them to hand it to them carefully. What they need is not a perfect explanation, it is an adult who stays calm, tells the truth, and makes clear that asking was the right thing to do.

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