

Helping Children Cope After a Tragedy: Compiled by Children's Medical Center

- **Limit media coverage:** It is important that children are not unnecessarily exposed to media coverage of these events. There is nothing to be gained from letting a child watch news coverage of the aftermath of the shootings. Older children may be interested and it may be appropriate to allow them some exposure; however, parents should watch with their children to be ready for questions and discussion. Younger children should not have any exposure to media coverage of these events. Naturally, even young children may gain information through peers or a chance exposure to TV news, so parents must be aware of this and be ready to help the children process this information.
- **Be calm:** Adults must model a sense of calm and reassurance for children, monitoring their own reaction, anxiety and outrage about the shooting.
- **Reassure them:** Some children may need more ongoing reassurance about their safety. It can be helpful for parents to point out steps that are being taken to help ensure a child's safety at school.
- **Answer their questions:** As questions arise, tell children the truth in a developmentally appropriate manner. Answer only the specific questions the child asked in a factual manner. It is critical not to speculate or overwhelm the child with more information than they are seeking. It is equally important that parents not close discussion of the topic — letting children ask questions and express their anxieties can help them cope.
- **Accept their reactions:** Do not dictate a reaction to a child or dismiss his reaction. Children should be told that feelings of uncertainty, fear or anxiety are normal reactions to events like this. Don't necessarily expect children to open up and give their feelings on demand; rather, be cognizant of signs and symptoms of anxiety and stress so that they are prepared to let their children express their feelings according to the child's timeline.
- **Maintain normal routines:** Maintain a sense of normalcy at home and at school by staying with normal routines for meals, homework and bed time. Understand that children struggling with anxiety and stress may have difficulty completing schoolwork or have difficulty falling asleep at night. At the same time, it's important not to be overly rigid about the routines; rather, try to maintain the normal schedule to provide children with a sense of predictability and security.
- **Watch for vulnerability:** Some children are by nature more vulnerable to periods of stress and anxiety. Parents and teachers must be aware of children who may be more vulnerable. Children who have experienced a previous traumatic event, personal loss, significant life change, or who experienced mental illness are particularly at risk for having trouble coping with such an event. Similarly, children who don't have a strong support system – network of friends and family – may be more vulnerable and in greater need of support.
- **Be there:** Parents should be very available to their children following this event. Not only will this reassure the child, but it also gives parents a good opportunity to monitor the child's stress level, anxiety and reaction. This is a good time to increase family time and to model a calm, reassuring and in-charge presence for children.
- **Warning signs:** Parents should be aware of warning signs of high anxiety and fear. These

might include persistent worry about their own safety or the safety of loved ones, problems falling asleep or other sleep disturbances such as nightmares, withdrawal from family and friends, excessive clinginess and dependence, irritability, sadness, or decreased activity, preoccupation with the recent shootings or ideas of death and violence, agitated behavior or new behavioral problems and nonspecific physical complaints. Do not hesitate to contact a pediatrician or mental health professional if you have concerns.

- It can be empowering for children to have activities to focus their energies on during times of heightened anxieties. Consider involving children in prayer groups, church activities, or volunteer work for community agencies that assist victims of crime or traumatic events. Younger children can be encouraged to draw pictures or write cards in support of victims of the shootings or other violent crimes and traumatic events. This is also a good time to rehearse and reinforce vigilance and child safety practices as well as home security measures.