

When Children Are the Victims

Shooting incidents involving children have an intense emotional impact for many of us. We often feel horror and sympathy when innocent adults are murdered but when the victims are children, these reactions can be greatly amplified.

Shock and Disbelief. “How could anyone kill an innocent child?” This question confounds many of us. Doing such a thing is so far beyond what is considered “human” that most of us simply can’t grasp it. The innate impulse among most adults is to protect the young, and such heinous acts violate our sense of fairness and humanity. This is particularly true for anyone who is a parent.

Fear and Anger. Such incidents remind us that, despite our best efforts, we cannot ensure the safety of our children. Understandably, this may motivate parents to keep their children away from public places and can catalyze obsessive worries about sending little ones to school or daycare. Some parents also react with anger or even rage (a response to fear and the loss of control). Children, being very perceptive about emotions, may “absorb” the fear and anger they experience in the adults around them, sometimes making them hyper-vigilant and anxious.

Emotional Roller Coaster. Dread, anger, guilt, frustration and grief are common emotional reactions to reports of violence, and when the victims are children, our protective instincts may intensify these feelings. You may seesaw between a need to focus on the trauma and discuss it with others and a need for comfort and distractions.

How you can help yourself, your friends and your family:

- **Be accepting.** Don’t judge your emotional responses (or those of loved ones) as right or wrong. They are what they are.
- **Connect.** Many people find some comfort in speaking about their fears with close friends and family. When others come to you with their distress, try to listen more than speak.
- **Limit media exposure.** Media coverage of tragic events can be unrelenting. Create “timeouts” from bad news — take walks or otherwise unplug. Be mindful of the impact of media on children and teens because, for them, school shootings are “close to home.”
- **If you have children.** Educate yourself and your children about what to do in an active threat situation. Talk to responsible parties at your child’s school or daycare about their security plans and how they prepare children to respond in an emergency.
- **Stay calm.** Limit emotional outbursts around your young ones. It makes it harder for them.

When to call for help:

- You find your life, work, or relationships being disrupted by your emotional reactions.
- You cannot find a way to express your feelings, especially overwhelming ones.
- You aren’t sure if the way you are reacting is “normal.”
- You are using alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- You are concerned about how a loved one is coping and want to know how to be helpful.

Talking to Children About Shooting Incidents

After a shooting incident, children may worry that they or their family will become victims of violence. They may have questions about the nature of violence or why people commit seemingly senseless acts. Often, they will look to the adults in their lives for answers.

When a child asks these questions, it is best to be honest about the reality of violence in the world and the fact that unexpected things can sometimes happen. However, it's also important to create a sense of safety and calm the child's fears. Simple reassurances work best for young children, while adolescents and teens may need more realistic facts about the risks of gun violence and tips for being safe while in a public place.

When talking to children, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- It is best to wait for your child to ask you about a violent incident. Avoid bringing it up first unless your child appears visibly distressed or her or his behavior has changed for the worse.
- Before speaking with your child, make sure your own emotions are under control. If you are visibly frightened, your child will feel anxious too. Focus on helping your child and "role model" appropriate behavior.
- Avoid giving details about the incident. Do not let young children see media reports or images, and set limits on access for older children.
- Encourage your child to express her or his feelings. Don't be too quick to jump in and try to "make it all better." Your job is to listen.
- Be ready for the "why?" question. Provide a simple, honest answer, such as "Sometimes people do bad things for reasons we don't understand." Make it clear that most people do not behave violently and that the perpetrator of the incident was not acting in an acceptable way.
- Avoid offering false reassurance to your child or saying things like "Nothing like this will ever happen to you." Instead, use phrases like "I will do everything I can to protect you and keep you safe."
- Put tragic events in perspective. Explain that while the incident was tragic and upsetting, it only affected a small handful of people in a specific place.

When children are anxious or afraid, it is not unusual for them to exhibit behavior issues, such as:

- Disruptions in sleep or eating patterns
- Nightmares
- Declining school performance
- "Clingy" behavior or fear of leaving home
- Disobedience or aggressiveness
- Headaches or stomach problems
- Difficulty concentrating

If your child shows ongoing signs of fear and anxiety, consider seeking professional assistance.

December 17, 2012

Dear Faithful of Southeastern Wisconsin:

In the aftermath of the tragic school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, we want to reassure you that we are doing everything in our power to ensure the safety of the children you have entrusted to our care.

Safety policies and procedures are in place at all our Catholic schools and parishes and are frequently reviewed by school and parish personnel. In light of recent events, these policies and procedures have become a special focus of our attention and concern. In addition, all schools and parishes have an established crisis and security plan.

This difficult time presents a unique opportunity for us to remind our children, youth, and each other of the importance of God's place in our lives. Both individual and communal prayer is essential, as are positive and supportive interpersonal communications. We are providing our schools and parishes with resources that may assist them in this regard.

Even as adults, we struggle to find hope in experiences of evil like this. The youngest members of our community, our children and youth, are especially vulnerable to the fear and anxiety that may arise from external influences. We suggest that you offer them the opportunity to discuss their feelings and, if they have concerns, give simple, honest, age-appropriate answers to questions they may ask. Reassure them that they are deeply loved and appreciated by their family, community, and God.

As members of the Church, we rely on our faith and on each other in our efforts to provide a safe environment for everyone.

In faith,

Kathleen A. Cepelka, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Catholic Schools

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Safe Environment Coordinator



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Dear Superintendents and Principals,

I am sure that many of you will be dealing with Advent Lessons and Carols, Christmas Plays, and Christmas parties with the hope and need to bring the school to closure for the Christmas holiday. Please know that you are in my prayers this week.

In the midst of the last week of school before Christmas, we will be addressing parents, teachers and children regarding the recent shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. The shooting is a terrifying reality difficult to articulate and put into words. The question of how to respond to parents and children who want to talk about the shooting and who are afraid that it will happen in their school cannot be ignored.

By now many of you have already put together some preliminary information for your school communities, but I thought I would send the information from the National Association of School Psychologist and from Catholic Charities as a reference for you. It may be of assistance in the coming days. I know that many of you have communicated with your schools communities, set up guidance counseling opportunities and reassured parents related to the security plan and process in your Diocese and schools. All these steps are of assistance in reassuring parents that the our school communities are doing all within their power to keep our children safe and address their personal needs during this difficult time.

One area that is not addressed in the link below is the need for and importance of prayer at this time. Our schools afford us the perfect opportunity to speak about redemption, grace, and heaven to children and parents seeking to understand and make sense of this very difficult event. The question being asked is how God can allow this to happen? The response, as you all know, involves the fundamental teaching that God does not intend this evil but that we are always free to make choices for good and for evil. Our choices have consequences that can affect others positively and negatively. Learning to support each other to make good choices is a way to talk about how we can support each other in dealing with the tragedy of Newton, Connecticut. The heroic acts of the principal, teachers and individual students shone light on the importance of good habits, friendship, and love as redeeming elements in the middle of very difficult and ugly events. These lessons can be applied in each and every day of our lives as children and adults.

Please know of our prayers for your school communities during this very full and difficult week. We ask Emmanuel, God-with-Us, to comfort and heal the Newtown Community. We ask Him to be at the center of our school communities teaching and guiding us in the coming weeks and months.

^[1] National Association of School Psychologists, "Talking to Children about Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers" http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/talkingviolence.pdf

In Christ,

Sr. John Mary Fleming, OP

Executive Director

Secretariat of Catholic Education

Tips for Helping Children Following a Crisis

1. **Be sensitive to what children already know** and take your cues from them; recognize that some parents may have chosen to protect their children from this tragedy or the details. With young primary aged children, allow them to introduce the topic first.
2. If children ask about it, **find out what they know before answering**; (ask, What do you know or understand? how do you feel? How can I help?)
3. When offering prayers, use simple language, such as **“We lift up in prayer all people who have died as a result of violence”**, rather than identifying specifics that might be too much information for young children.
4. **Limit the amount of exposure your children have to the coverage** on TV and other forms of media. Pre-school age children will have a limited understanding of what they see and hear, and may draw conclusions that are fearful to them. This also applies to older children and adults who may have mental limitations.
5. **Offer children opportunities to discuss their feelings**, perhaps in a family discussion. Let them know that all of their feelings are OK to have.
6. **Give simple, honest answers to questions, based on the level of understanding for each child.**
7. **Encourage older children to think and talk about their beliefs** about what this means to them, or what action they might take.
8. **If they ask, “Will this happen here?”** Let them know the safety measures that are in place at your school.
9. **Children need reassurance.** Let them know that you love and cherish them and that we can handle whatever happens.
10. **This event may stir up similar events** for students who have experienced the violent death of a family member or close friend and they may need to talk or write or draw about that; encourage them to do so. If there are young children who may not have been exposed to the TV coverage, make arrangements to talk with the student individually, or have them speak with the school counselor or social worker.

PRAY!!! for yourselves, your families, the first responders and their families, our world, and PEACE!

For more information regarding programs, services or supportive options please contact:
***Catholic Charities SouthWestern Ohio, 100 East Eighth Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202, (513) 241-7745***