



“Mom, I’m worried.”

The tragic crime at the Sandy Hook Elementary School that took so many precious lives on Friday raises very deep issues for parents.

“What is going on in our world?”

“How do I talk to my child about this?”

“How do I reassure my child that they are safe in school?”

“Are they safe in school?....”

Vicarious Trauma

This is typically thought of as experienced by professionals that witness a lot of traumatic experiences in those they work with. I would contend that it is vicarious trauma that many of OUR children will be experiencing as they experience tragedies such as these horrific school shootings and the like. Our children are hearing about the incidents and often times seeing images of the incidents. Their mind goes to, “This could happen to me. I’m a child. I go to a school. Some people have guns. Some kids in my

school are really angry and talk about violent things.” The same goes for natural disasters.

Children experiencing vicarious trauma might show signs of anxiety. They might be worried about things that were not previously an issue. Children might experience bad dreams. They may become more quiet than usual or they may act out more readily. Sometimes, the energy and “excitement” of the trauma might cause children to respond emotionally in an unexpected way, such as acting hyper or silly or even telling about the tragedy with a smile on their face as if they are happy or think it is funny. Assuredly, this has to do with how children respond to additional emotional energy in their environment. They are surely not happy about people getting hurt, rather, they are having difficulty processing the extra energy in the environment.

How can parents help?

1. If your children are not around when you get word of a traumatic event that your children might be exposed to, call a grounded friend. Talk it over and try your best to get into a calm frame of mind. If your children are present, if possible, go behind closed doors and call a friend. Remember, a part of your child’s brain is always “tuned in” to their parent.
2. Turn the TV off. Get as much of the information as you need when your child is not present. They need to hear the news from you, and you need to disperse the news to your child in a developmentally appropriate manner that only you know your child can comprehend. They need to receive the information in pieces that they can take in and they need to receive the information once, not the 25 times in an hour that the news flashes come across the screen.
3. Monitor your conversations with others in person and by phone when your child is present.
4. It can be helpful to focus on the First Responders, rather than the victims. I.e. “I am so grateful that the police men were there to help direct the teachers and children in what to do.” Or, “The teachers were trained and look how they were leading the children to a safe place.” Or, in a natural disaster, “There are lots of workers out to repair the power lines and clear the streets.” Or, for those who are injured, “The Red Cross will be helping all of the hurt people and the paramedics are there also.”
5. Parents are guides for children. Manage your emotions well and don’t be afraid to show sadness to your child and even tears. It is ok for parents to cry and for parents and children to cry together. It is better to turn off the news coverage and shed a tear than to glue yourself to the TV and take in every detail.

6. Leave your “adult obligations” for later. Drop it in these times and go for a beach walk with your children. Have a game night. If you want to focus on the tragedy, make cards for the people impacted by the tragedy. Think of ways that you can support them in a concrete way, such as sending something that they might need or donating their extra pennies to the Red Cross with a note.
7. Many will agree that there are some spiritual issues here. “Why would God allow this?” Surely, these tragedies provide an opportunity for each of us to look at our faith and why or how we believe what we do. Continue to seek and impart this seeking to your children.
8. If you see signs of anxiety or trauma, do not ignore them. We know that anxiety symptoms left to their own, typically do not get better, but more imbedded. Seek professional assistance if you are unsure.
9. Even in tragedy, we tend to return to the baseline of our “normal” life and routine before long. When you find yourself back into your normal routine, revisit the incident. Your child may or may not bring up, “Mom, I’m worried. Remember when that school shooting happened?...” Whether it is a natural disaster or the evil of our society, it is ok for parents to be the first one to revisit it with their child, “Hey John, I’ve been wondering if you have been thinking about the tornado that caused some much destruction last month?” Keep the dialog going with your children. Always.

Blessings of peace and joy in this holiday season. Especially, God bless those directly impacted by the school shooting.

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Follow the links to learn more about the impact of trauma.

Acute Stress Disorder
<http://www.psyweb.com/Mdisord/AnxietyDis/asd.jsp>

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
<http://www.psyweb.com/Mdisord/AnxietyDis/posttraumatic.jsp>