

10 Tips to Help Your Kids Deal with Violence

Children are exposed to numerous accounts of violence, such as abductions, murder, and random acts of terrorism. Parents need to be aware that children may react strongly to those events and should be prepared to discuss their child's thoughts and feelings.

The following are some guidelines for parents.

1. **Find out what information your child is getting.** Ask your children what they are hearing at school. If appropriate, give them factual information to dispel rumors they are hearing. Monitor their exposure to television reports to ensure kids are not watching repeats of the same violent images. (See 7 below.) Help explain what they see if they do watch television. To start a discussion you might ask, "What are the kids at school saying about ...[the incident]?" Listen to children's thoughts. Reflect what you think the child is saying, and provide correct information if needed. See step 4 below.
2. **Acknowledge feelings.** Tune into your child's feelings. Reflect the feelings and the situation. For example, "You feel scared that the building was blown up." Or, "You're sad so many people were killed." If the child appears unaffected, you could ask tentatively, "I'm wondering if you feel sad so many people were hurt?" It is also helpful to acknowledge your feelings. "I was terrified when I heard about the attack, because Uncle John works in New York City."
3. **Offer tools to cope with the feelings.** Share with your child how you cope with the feelings. "I am so upset I am going to go sit in the garden and absorb the peaceful feelings there." Suggest ways your child can calm himself or herself. "If you're feeling sad, you can ask for a hug, we can go for a walk, or you can draw a picture of your feelings." Once you have addressed the feelings, you can talk about the situation.
4. **Talk about the situation.** Be honest and careful about what you say. Give your children information at their own level and put the event in context. Explain that even though frightening things happen to children every once in awhile, most children go about their day with no harm. Don't describe unlikely scenarios that would unnecessarily frighten your children. However, don't totally avoid the topic since kids know something is going on.

5. **Reassure your children that adults are taking care of them.** Tell your children what you and others are doing to ensure their safety. For example, "The FAA has grounded all planes until they can make sure they are safe." Tell them what their daycare provider or teacher is doing to maintain safety. Review safety precautions and practice routines. Tell children what they can do to enhance their own safety. For example, tell them to go to an adult whom they trust if they feel threatened in any situation.
6. **Provide extra emotional support for your children.** Understand that children of different ages react differently. Younger children may react by showing more separation anxiety when their parents leave them at daycare or school. Older children may present a tough exterior or act out aggressive behavior. Teens may need someone to listen as they analyze what happened.
7. **Limit the amount of exposure to violent television, movies, videos and computer games.** Research has found that children who watch a lot of violence feel less safe than those who watch little or none. And, an increased exposure to violence increases children's tolerance for violence. The impact of violence on children is cumulative. This is true for children of all ages.
8. **Be aware of other areas of children's lives that may make them especially vulnerable** to fears regarding violence against children. Children who have experienced a traumatic incident in the past, children who are grieving a personal tragedy, and children who are ill are all more susceptible to anxiety regarding other events.
9. **Reduce stress levels.** Don't overdo activities. Maintain normal routines for eating, sleeping, and play. Keep an eye open for any signs of anxiety like: increased irritability or frustration, troubles eating or sleeping, bodily complaints like headache, stomachache, etc. If symptoms continue for an extended period, get professional advice.
10. **Avoid infecting your children's lives with your own anxiety.** Children are tuned into their parents' feelings. If you are feeling overwhelmed by anxiety caused by traumatic events, take steps to deal with your own feelings before your children are affected. You can talk to someone supportive or get counseling if needed.