

How to talk to your children about events that cause distress

WHEN TRAUMA STRIKES

by Dr. Kim Arbus

The recent school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut was a day most of us won't soon forget. We all try to grieve the loss of innocent children, the student survivors who are traumatized, the families who have had to go through the unthinkable, all such difficult images to process. The questions plague us all...Why did it happen? Could it happen again? Is my child's school safe? ...and the list goes on.

As adults, we don't always feel we have the answers, but children often have even more questions about these events, leaving them feeling unsafe and unsettled. While adults will have heard of similarly distressing events in the past, children who learn of traumas like that of Sandy Hook Elementary don't have the tools to know how to process it.

Our job as adults and parents is to ensure that our children feel safe and secure. Sometimes, this means providing them reassurance, other times children need more to soothe themselves when they hear of shocking events.

How to handle it. Firstly, don't be afraid to talk to your children. If they have heard of the incident they are likely thinking about it already. Providing them with an opportunity to talk about it, if they choose, is very important.

Some parents are afraid to bring up distressing news events their children may have heard about, but it is unlikely that asking them their feelings about it would cause any harm. Rather it is more likely that asking about it will help them soothe fears that could otherwise become quite irrational. Sometimes, a child's

imagination will run wild. For example, following the incidents in Connecticut a child said to me during therapy: "Why was a monster chasing children down the halls with a giant gun?" Once we clarified that there are no such things as monsters, the child was able to explain that he had heard an adult describe the killer as a monster and was very confused. Once he knew the 'monster' was actually a person, it was much easier for him to understand. Clarifying this important fact helped him feel much better.

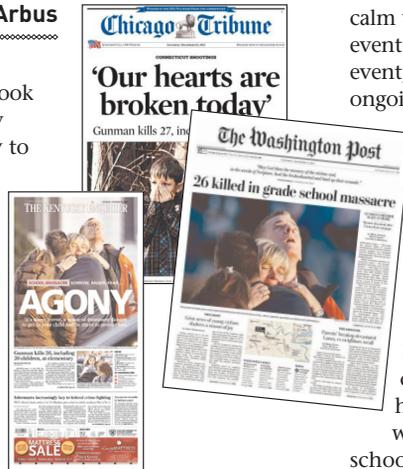
When we can talk about things together, we can help each other cope with the unknowns in the world. While there are no good explanations for such an atrocity, it is not about trying to explain the events to children. Instead, children just need to know that they are safe, that they don't need to worry about it happening to them. Even when parents feel fear about it themselves, it is in a child's best interest for parents to remain calm while talking to children about a traumatic event. It is fine to share your emotions about the event, however it is best to minimize sharing any ongoing fears. Children will pick up on parents'

worries and it will be difficult for them to manage anxiety and fear if a parent is not able to contain theirs. Events that may not be viewed as threatening by children, can become so if they observe panic reactions of parents or teachers.

Previous mental health problems can also determine a child's response to a trauma. It is important to keep a close eye on any changes to your child's eating or sleeping habits, their clinginess or any new issues with separation, their desire to go to school or play, increases in nightmares, or new irritability or mood changes.

The events that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary affected us all. Some children in our therapy practice have described escalation in fears when at school, especially during 'lockdown' drills. One child described significant fears as she was shut into the closet in her classroom during a drill. While these procedures are important to learn how to be safe, unfortunately for some children, they can have negative reactions.

If your child expresses excessive concern about practice lockdowns or hearing about traumatic events and your efforts to soothe them are not working, it may be important to have them seen by a psychologist who can assess their level of anxiety. If their fears interfere with their daily lives or if they can't turn off their worries before bed or while at school, a psychologist can help. Psychologists use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help people with a variety of difficulties. These strategies are well researched and have good efficacy with both children and adults.



■ Dr. Kim Arbus, C.Psych. is a Clinical Psychologist and works at Vaughan Psychologists, located at Major Mackenzie and Keele in Maple. She can be reached at 416-801-8889, or visit psychologyhelps.ca.