

Talking With Children After A Traumatic Event

BY SYLVIA EMERLING, MSW
Mental Health Case Manager
Family Service of the
Chautauqua Region
Drop Out Prevention Program

Do you remember the first day you started school? What were your feelings? Were you worried, excited and nervous?

This past month, we as a nation, country and individual community watched in disbelief the tragedy that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

For many, this consumed every waking moment, and comments from Australia to Jamestown filled the pages of social media sites. We, as adults, had a hard time wrapping our head around how this could happen, let alone happen to little children. As a nation we are once again changed, and our children exposed to danger, sadness, confusion and fear.

To help families, school staff and the community help these children deal with this tragedy, here are a few tips.

First: Take care of yourself.

We need to seek support from others and be aware of how we react to the trauma in front of our children. Children are very aware of the worries of their parents, teachers and friends. It's OK for adults to express some of their worries to their children, but remain mindful that we can handle the crisis. How a parent responds to a crisis impacts a child's ability to cope.

Second: Ask what the child knows about the crisis.

Depending on the child's age, this can affect the degree of understanding and how they respond to the crisis or traumatic events. Clarifying misinformation, listen-



ing carefully, and assessing the child's level of distress or worry is very important. The following open-ended questions can help the child process the trauma:

"What was the hardest thing for you that you saw or heard?"

"Is there anything else that you haven't told me or that you're worried about?"

Third: Sort out what concerns for personal or family safety the child may be experiencing.

With younger children, proximity becomes a concern, which often leads to confusion for them and fears that they are in danger, confusion about how close they are to danger, and whether they are at direct risk.

Explore children's worries about completing routine tasks or upcoming events such as playing outside, going to bed, going to school, riding the school bus, and leaving their parents and siblings. Past traumas and fears may resurface as children try to conquer their fears and anxieties about the trauma. Making sure we are listening and not minimizing the child's fears is very important.

Fourth: Maintain routines.

Assess your child's level of distress before returning them to extracurricular activities. Sometimes regression in behavior may occur such as bedwetting or bed-

time fears. This is not unusual in stressed or traumatized children. Providing a physical and emotional presence with children as much as possible during the crisis is important. Limiting exposure to media coverage of the event is also good. Watch and discuss television coverage with school-aged children and teens, reassuring them of your ability to keep them safe.

Fifth: Help the child work toward mastering the trauma.

Taking into account the child's age and maturity, communicate your thoughts and feelings honestly. Modeling how to cope with the stress appropriately helps children understand that disasters are generally rare events and that no one can control everything completely. Watch to see that children do not develop lasting fears or prejudices based on the disaster or traumatic events. Help them understand that bad things can happen, and that they were not responsible for the disaster or trauma.

In time, with reassurance, love, support, and getting back to routines and family relationships, most children can grow from the traumatic experience and continue with normal emotional development. In cases of children being excessively stressed and having difficulty with daily functions in their normal routines or behaving in dangerous ways, professional help should be sought from your pediatrician, mental health provider or clergy.

Family Service of the Chautauqua Region is a family focused, mental health counseling agency providing services at home, school, work and in the community. For more information about their programs and services, visit their website at www.familyservicecr.com or call 488-1971.