

Parent Guidelines for Helping Youth after Mass Violence

The recent attack has been an extremely frightening experience, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. Your children and family will recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and community. Keep in mind that families and youth had different experiences during and after this violent incident, including those who experienced physical injury, were involved in police investigation, or worried about the safety of family members and friends. This attack might also act as a reminder to other violent events that family members have experienced in the past. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to you and your family during and after this event. Some adults and children have been seriously injured and will require medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Some are adjusting to the death of a loved one. Over time, some youth and adults will return to normal routines, while others may struggle. Children and teens may react differently to the attack depending on their age and prior experiences. Expect that youth may respond in different ways. Be supportive and understanding of different reactions, even when you are having your own reactions and difficulties.

Children's and teen's reactions are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers respond to the attack. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common after mass violence. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your children.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others
- Fears that another violent incident may occur
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increase in activity level
 - Decrease in concentration and attention
 - Increase in irritability and anger
 - Sadness, grief, and/or withdrawal
 - Radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future
 - Increases or decreases in sleep and appetite
 - Engaging in harmful habits like drinking, using drugs, or doing things that are harmful to self or others
 - Lack of interest in usual activities, including how they spend time with friends
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school and work-related habits and behavior with peers and family
- Staying focused on the violent event (talking repeatedly about it)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the attack (seeing friends who were also present during the attack, media images, seeing a truck speeding, police)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (screaming, tires screeching)

Things I Can Do for Myself

- **Take time to reflect how this attack has impacted you.** Take a few moments for yourself so you can express your own emotions and also find the words you want to use to your children about what happened.
- **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep and exercise.
- **Help each other.** Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or support each other.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.
- **Give yourself a break.** Take time to rest and do things that you like to do.

Things I Can Do for My Children

- **Spend time talking with your children.** Let them know that they are welcome to ask questions and express their concerns and feelings. You should remain open to answering new questions and providing helpful information and support. You might not know all the answers and it is OK to say that. At the same time, don't push them to talk if they don't want to. Let them know you are available when they are ready.
- **Find time to have these conversations.** Use time such as when you eat together or sit together in the evening to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Try not to have these conversations close to bedtime, as this is the time for resting.
- **Promote your children's self-care.** Help children by encouraging them to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest and exercise. Let them know it is OK to take a break from talking with others about the recent event or from participating in any of the community events.
- **Help children feel safe.** Talk with children about their concerns over safety and discuss changes that are occurring at school and in the community to promote safety. Encourage your children to voice their concerns to you or to teachers at school. If they know the circumstances of the attack, encourage them to talk with you if they have continued worry so you can help to differentiate what happened during the attack and what they are worried about now.
- **Maintain expectations or "rules."** Stick with family rules, such as curfews, checking in with you while with friends, and keeping up with homework and chores. On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where teens are going and what they are planning to do to monitor how they are doing. Assure them that the extra check-in is temporary, just until things stabilize.
- **Address acting out behaviors.** Help teens understand that "acting out" behaviors are a dangerous way to express strong feelings over what happened. Examples of "acting out" include intentionally cutting oneself, driving recklessly, engaging in unprotected sex, and abusing drugs or alcohol. You can say something like, "Many children and adults feel out of control and angry right now. They might even think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way - but it's not a good idea to act on it." Talk with children about other ways of coping with these feelings (distraction, exercise, writing in a journal, spending time with others).
- **Limit media and social media exposure.** Protect your teen from too much media coverage and social media about the incident, including on the Internet, radio, television, or other technologies (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter). Explain to them that media coverage and social media technologies can

trigger fears of the violent event happening again and also spread rumors. Let them know they can distract themselves with another activity or that they can talk to you about how they are feeling. Also ask them to describe what they have seen online already so you can correct any misinformation or provide support.

- **Be patient.** Children may be more distracted and need added help with homework or projects once school is in session. They may need temporarily extra time to complete their work or more frequent breaks. Make sure they are patient with themselves as well.
- **Manage reminders.** Help children identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it.
- **Monitor changes in relationships.** Explain to children that strains on relationships are expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during this time. Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Encourage tolerance for how your family and friends may be recovering or feeling differently. Accept responsibility for your own feelings, by saying “I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I was having a bad day.”
- **Address radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future.** Explain to children that changes in people’s attitudes are common and tend to be temporary after a mass violent incident like this. These feelings can include feeling scared, angry, and sometimes revengeful. Find other ways to make them feel more in control and talk about their feelings.
- **Get adults in your children’s life involved.** If there has been a serious injury of your child or a death of a loved one, or if your child is having difficulties, let your child’s teacher or other caring adults know so that they can be of help.
- **Empower your child to get involved in their medical care.** For children with injuries and long-term medical needs, encourage them to participate in medical discussions and decisions as much as possible. Have them ask their own questions and give opinions about different procedures. Teens are especially concerned about their physical appearance, fitting in, and their privacy. Talk with them about their concerns, problem-solve ways to address them, and respect their privacy.
- **Seek professional help.** If children have continued difficulties for a couple of months after the attack, parents should consult a trusted helper—a doctor or mental health professional.