



Talking with Young Children about the Pittsburgh “Tree of Life” Synagogue Tragedy

***A Message from the Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health
College of Education and Human Services
Montclair State University
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During the past two years, we have witnessed multi-media messages with hurtful and divisive interpersonal behavior and discourse about how our nation will be led, and how we speak of, and regard, each other. The behavior and language about those from other nations and creeds, and about those with differences and disabilities, have resulted in a level of fear and anger rarely witnessed in our lifetimes. Despite efforts made by many parents and educators to insulate and protect young children from these experiences, children are always watching, always listening, always feeling what is being said and done.

The tragedy in Pittsburgh on October 27, and its anti-Semitic message, comes on the heels of 13 pipe bombs mailed to Democratic political and civic leaders, and a shooting of two black people in a Kentucky Kroeger’s grocery store after the gunman failed to gain access to a predominantly Black church.

We stand together in pain and resolve to heal and grow!

Young children see the images and actions directly on TV and other electronic media, and witness these events indirectly through the words, affect, gestures, intonation and actions of adults and in how it changes those who love and spend time with them. Children form understandings based on their level of development, and much more than adults, they begin to make interpretations about what this all means to them, their families and their friends. This is not an abstract “ideological” debate for them. It is personal. It is about their safety, their family, their community. It is local, not global.

These worries lay atop the “new normal” fear of terrorist acts from outside of our nation, and threats from within about intolerance, nationalism, deportation and violence.

Here are some guidelines about how to speak with your children when they show worry and fear about these events and about their future:

1. Be there and be calm. Children need to feel safe. This is a human biological requirement, that children (and adults) scan the faces, voices and movements of others to discern safety. This occurs at the level of deeply embedded brain systems. Your presence, voice, words, soft and loving touches, provide each child with the best ways of feeling safe.
2. Ask children what they know and what they have heard. Listen to the child's story and follow the child's lead. Ask children what they know and have heard. Correct the accounts and give permission for many different feelings: scared, angry, worried, etc. Use simple language and correct any misunderstood accounts. Tell a child what they need to know, not all that you know.
3. Tell children what happened avoiding graphic accounts or unnecessary details. For example, **don't say**, "A bad person had a rifle and went into a building and started shooting people and many people were hurt and died." Instead, **say something like**, "Someone did some bad things and people were hurt. But you are safe here and we will protect you."
4. Practice conversations with other adults. Use simple language. Avoid imposing meanings or interpretations. Often children will experience and express their feelings through their body states. Ask them "what" and "where" they feel (e.g. head, tummy, chest, neck, etc.) as well as "how" do they feel.
5. Share your feelings: It is okay and important for children to know that the adults in their lives have the same feelings when bad things happen. Let children know you feel these feelings and that you are there for them.
6. It is important that you remain in control. Monitor your own emotion and tone of voice. Pay attention to your gestures, affect, and voice because children pay special attention to these ways of communicating. You can help children feel safer and calmer when your behaviors convey these feelings. If your own reaction is difficult to manage, enlist another adult to help you with the children.
7. When there is uncertainty, say something like: "We don't know everything that happened but police and firefighters are helping people who were hurt." Let the child's responses guide what you say next.

8. Limit repeated exposure to images and reports of the events: When children do see images or reports of tragedies, Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* suggested that we help them "look for all the people who are helping". Couple the sad tragedy with the comforting presence of others who are helping and taking care of others. *Pittsburgh is the home of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.*
9. Remember the 3R's of security: Relationships, Routines and Restoration: Highlight relationships with familiar and consistent caregivers, family and friends. Protect and increase routines that are familiar and normalizing such as play time, going to school, reading books, and other patterned activities.
10. Intervene with the particular learning style and temperament of the child in mind: Children with autism and other special needs may process information-gestures, pictures and language- in different ways. Often a "4L's" strategy may help: *Less Language and Longer Latency*. This means that you can use fewer words and wait longer for a reply. Ask the child what they were thinking and feeling and even draw pictures or tell stories. Use your own facial expressions, voice and words to reflect and "tune in" to their emotions. If helpful, use pictures or drawings to identify and label different feelings. Be prepared for misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and keep clarifying and reassuring the child that you will be sure they are safe.
11. Provide structure and communicate safety: Uncertainty is the province of adulthood. While we as adults may feel unsure of the possibility of future tragedies, we must always let children know that we will take care of them and protect them. Children thrive when provided structure and safety.
12. Remember to take care of yourself: If the adults in a child's life are overwhelmed, overstressed and overtired, it will be more difficult to be safe, secure and stable for the child. Pay attention to the "ABC's" of self-care: awareness, balance and connection, in your own life.
13. Engage your child in communal and social gatherings of care and support. Now more than ever, immerse your children in a network of social relationships that reflect messaging that countermands the threatening, divisive themes that have become so common in the social discourse. There is no greater antidote to fear than social engagement and experiences of security. Encourage your children to get involved in a community or service program such as collecting items for a food bank, involvement in an event or gathering where they experience a culture outside of their own, visiting the sick or those who are alone, engagement in service to others.

14. Enkindle in your child a belief and expectation that you and they will be okay.

Building on the notion of “repair” and survival after loss and disappointment, children understand through everyday human experiences and participating in sports, that sometimes you “win” and sometimes you “lose”. Many children have often encountered other, more personal losses, such as changing teachers or going to a new school, moving to a new neighborhood, loss of a pet, or death of a grandparent. Allow for disappointment but couple that with the conviction that good things will still happen and new opportunities will arise.

15. Recognize that there are some feelings that we can only share and cannot fix: Children need us to be there with and for them at such times. It's appropriate to both not have an answer and be with the children in their sadness and confusion.

Please contact our Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health at Montclair State University with any questions at 973-655-6685 or at caecmh@montclair.edu.

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