



Talking with children about the recent school shooting in Sandy Hook 12/14/12
Dr. Tim Kearney, Chief Behavioral Health Officer, Community Health Centers, Inc.

All of us as parents and those who work with children wish that we could protect them from the knowledge of the tragedies that occur in the world around them and from the impact that this knowledge has on them. Unfortunately we cannot; especially in this age of constant news feeds and social media. We must therefore help them to develop the skills to cope with what happened and structure their world to make their response as manageable as possible.

Like adults, **children need accurate information** about what happened. Give them the facts as they are known, and correct details as more information becomes available. **Deliver this information in age appropriate ways.** Young children just need the basics – “someone came into a school in Sandy Hook and shot some of the people there, adults and children were hurt and some died”. Be guided by their response as to how much information to give them beyond that. Older children are more likely to be curious and ask more questions, again, let their interest be your guide as to how much to go into it.

Common concerns children will raise include:

1. Wanting to know **where it happened**. Younger children will assume it is right around the corner, and may think that a police car or ambulance going by their window is responding. Given them an accurate sense of the distance and if possible tie it into a reference that will make sense to them. “Do you remember the mall with the merry go round in Danbury? That is about an hour drive from here. It happened in a town near there.”
2. Wanting to know **if it is over or not**. Seeing the news over and over children may think it is still going on, or has happened in lots of places or lots of times. Reassure them with accurate information. “There is just one shooting today but the TV keeps talking about it and it seems like there are many different ones. There is only one and it is over now.” Turn off the TV and do not subject your children to more information that they need about this.
3. Wanting to know if **anyone they know was hurt**. Younger children in particular may ask about specific people they know. Remember that they may have no idea of the difference between Sandy Hook and Sacramento and reassure them that their friends and relatives were not involved. (Unless they were, more on that later.) Older children are more likely to have a compassionate response for the children and their families in the school. Acknowledge and support their emotions and take whatever action is appropriate within the context of your family’s beliefs (praying for the families involved, participating in giving to any funds set up for the family, lighting candles, and so on.)



4. Wanting to know that **they are safe**. This can be both an immediate concern – that whoever hurt the children in Sandy Hook is not going to hurt them, and a longer term worry that they may not be safe in their school. Do not offer meaningless reassurance – any school is potentially in danger. But talk about how the school works to keep children safe, review any safety plans your school has in place, remind them that although 27 (or however many are confirmed) people were hurt or killed, most of the people at the school are ok.
5. Needing some **way to express their feelings** of anger, fear, or relief. In age appropriate ways engage your child in drawing, play, or verbal discussions.
6. Wanting to know **why this happened**. The direct response is the best one here “People sometimes make bad decisions that hurt other people. I do not know why someone would shoot these people and I am glad that it is over”. Depending on the age of the child, they may ask for specific questions. Be guided by your own belief systems and explain to your child as you would any other area of life.

There are some actions parents can take as well:

1. **Reassure** children that they are safe and review safety plans that they can utilize.
2. **Limit** children’s exposure to TV and other media. Turn off the stream of information and **redirect** your child’s attention to other matters unrelated to the tragedy.
3. **Talk to adults** about your own reactions – do not use your children to think through your own fears and worries about their safety. Turn to your own supports – family and friends. You must take care of yourself so that you can care for your children.
4. **Reach out to professionals such** as your child’s primary care provider, school staff, school based health center therapist, clergy, or others who know children and can guide you in how best to help your child.

Most children will be fine with support. Those with previous trauma or who are already anxious may need additional help from parents and family or professionals.

The following links also provides good resources:

- HealthyChildren.org –
 - <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/news/Pages/AAP-Offers-Resources-to-Help-Parents,-Children-and-Others-Cope-in-the-Aftermath-of-School-Shootings.aspx>
- National Institutes of Health –
 - http://www.cc.nih.gov/cc/patient_education/pepubs/childeath.pdf