8 Tips for Talking to Kids & Youth

1. Concentrate on making them feel safe
   Children need answers to three fundamental questions:
   - Am I safe?
   - Are you, the people who care for me, safe?
   - How will these events affect my daily life?
   Parent should expect to answer these questions over and over again. For those with toddlers and preschool children who may not yet be able to express their concerns in words, it’s still important to reassure them that everyone is safe, and that life will continue in a normal fashion. Maintaining regular routines can help demonstrate that things are going to be okay despite the event that happened.

2. Listen and encourage questions
   Find out what your kids already know. Encourage questions. You can then respond in an age-appropriate way. The aim is not to worry them with the upsetting details, but to protect them from misinformation they may have heard from friends or disturbing images they may have seen on television or the web.

3. If you don’t know the answer, it’s okay to admit it
   If your child asks a question that you can’t answer, tell them so. Then do some research to try to help them sort it out. If they ask “why did this have to happen?” don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know”. Offer reassurances that you’re there to keep them safe and help your child sort through the fact that sometimes awful things happen.

4. Normalize and support their emotional responses
   Let them know that it’s OK to be frightened, sad, or angry; it’s all part of being human. Recognize that some kids may act out their distress by acting out or becoming very quiet. Difficult emotions can cause difficult behaviour. Try to stay calm and how understanding, avoid punishing them for their reactions but you can still set limits on behaviours that are not okay. Let them know that talking may help and that you are there for them.

5. Follow media reports or online updates privately
   Young children (in particular) are easily traumatized, and seeing, or hearing, about the graphic details of the event may be more than they can cope with. Adults, too, should ensure they are dealing with their own emotions by talking to others, so they can continue to respond well to their children’s need.

6. Give children and youth creative outlets
   Some children may not be prepared to speak about what they have heard, but may find drawing, journaling, playing music or other creative activities helpful to deal with their emotions and stress. Their creative activities can be helpful starting points for conversation.

7. Access their support networks
   Remember that relationships with family, close friends and community are crucial; they are the foundation of your children’s world. Let them know we’re here for each other. Some children/youth may want to contribute to local community support and resiliency efforts and activities. This can help restore a sense of community, resiliency, purpose, and control after a tragedy.

8. Access local resources
   Most children will be able to cope with the support and understanding of their caregivers, teachers, coaches, and community members. However, some may have more difficulties that are continuing and may need further help from a school counselor or other mental health provider. Please reach out if help is needed.
Coping with Tragedy: For Parents & Caregivers

The following tips are based on the literature and conversations with the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health.

Resources
Use your smartphone camera to scan the codes below or click the link.

Road to Resilience Webinar Series
www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health/parents/road-resilience-webinar-series

IWK Health - Trauma Informed Care
www.youreexperiencesmatter.com

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.nctsn.org

Coping as a Parent - Worksheet
www.iwk.nshealth.ca/sites/default/files/mha/PARENT%20Resource%20Final.pdf

Webinar Series - Coping with Tragedy

Video 1
https://youtu.be/138IWCI7tpw

Video 2
https://youtu.be/Zvy6Yap35_8

Video 3
https://youtu.be/n4bvBfF1jPc

Adapted from the MGH Clay Center (mghclaycenter.org), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org), and the Centre for the Study of Traumatic Stress (cstsonline.org)

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