

Talking to Students about Violent Events

How to Support Students During Difficult Times

Whether students experience a violent event firsthand or hear about it through the news, they may respond with a range of feelings and concerns. These events can lead to difficult conversations at school or show up in changes in student behavior. This guide offers strategies to help educators support students as they process their emotions about violence and these kinds of events.



Try This!

Here are a few grounding exercises that can help students regulate their emotions.

- Notice 4 things you can see, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can touch, 1 thing you can smell.
- Stretch or dance to release tension.
- Create a relaxing playlist.

Core Tips for Supporting Students

- **Reassure safety** – Emphasize that schools have procedures in place to protect students and adults are working hard to keep everyone safe.
- **Validate feelings** – All feelings are okay after a tragedy. Let students talk or start by asking how their friends are feeling.
- **Let their questions guide you** – Follow the student's questions and notice cues they want to talk, like staying nearby or asking about small things.
- **Offer outlets** – Encourage students to engage in different activities to help regulate and release their feelings. Examples include drawing, imaginative play, reading, journaling, art, music, or projects.
- **Encourage grounding & breathing exercises** – These involve simple sensory activities to help students be more grounded in their current situation rather than violent events.
- **Balance normalcy with flexibility** – Maintaining a normal routine can help students feel safe and at ease, but it's important not to push typical activities if they are feeling overwhelmed.



Observing and Responding to Students' Emotional State

It is important to watch for behavioral changes and signs of stress in students after violent events have occurred. The following warning signs can help you recognize when a student may need extra support.

Warning Signs

- ☐ Behaving in uncharacteristic ways
- ☐ Being unusually quiet
- ☐ Acting out
- ☐ Appearing unusually tired
- ☐ Having difficulty concentrating
- ☐ Seeming distracted or distressed
- ☐ Frequently arriving late or leaving early
- ☐ Showing a decreased appetite



While many students simply need time and support, others may require professional mental health care, especially those with prior trauma or existing mental health challenges.

Children don't need all the details – they need reassurance, honesty, and safe spaces to share their feelings.

Media and Information Exposure

- **Limit viewing of violent events or news** - Too much exposure can cause fear and confusion.
- **Avoid adult conversations about violence in front of children** - These conversations may cause students to be more afraid and aware of graphic details.
- **Encourage breaks from constant coverage** - Older students may get caught in constant violent news streams; breaks help reduce the emotional impact.
- **Correct misinformation** - Emphasize facts and avoid using stereotypes and theories when the events are discussed.

Practical Digital Safety Steps

- Pause notifications from apps.
- Block harmful content.
- Follow uplifting accounts.



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Age Appropriate Conversations

Elementary School

- Keep information brief, simple, and reassuring.
- Remind them of concrete safety measures, such as locked doors, playground supervision, or emergency drills.
- Avoid overexposure to media. Children under 6 may not realize media images are not happening again.



Middle School



- Expect direct questions: “Am I really safe at school?”
- Help them separate reality from fantasy.
- Give honest, clear answers, but avoid unnecessary details.
- Facts or statistics may help students feel better, such as “the likelihood of being injured or killed at school is 1 in 450,000.”

High School

- Teens may debate causes of violence and want solutions.
- Encourage discussion, empower them to take action:
 - Report concerns to adults.
 - Follow school safety guidelines.
 - Identify a trusted adult at school.



Key Talking Points

Student Concerns

I'm scared school isn't safe anymore.

What makes our school safe?

What should I do if I'm worried something might happen?

I feel upset or anxious about what I heard or saw.

Why does violence happen? Are there other options?

Educator Responses

Schools are safe places. Adults are working hard to protect you.

Even though violence is scary, the chance of it happening at school are low.

Our school is safe because we have rules and safety drills.

Adults keep you safe, but students can help too by speaking up if something feels wrong.

If you ever feel unsafe, tell a trusted adult right away so they can take action.

Reporting your concerns is not tattling. It helps keep everyone safe.

It's okay to feel upset. Doing things we enjoy can help us feel better.

Talking to friends, family, or a counselor can make you feel less alone.

Violence is never the solution. Asking for help is always the right choice.

When we feel angry or upset, it helps to use kind words, take a break, or talk to someone we trust.



Try This!

There are several activities that educators can use with their classes to help students during these times. The lists below provide activities to use by age group.

Elementary Students

- **Feelings Art** – Let students draw or color how they are feeling.
- **Story Time with Discussion** – Read a book about safety, courage, or kindness and talk about it.

Middle School Students

- **Journaling Time** – Encourage students to write down thoughts, questions, or feelings privately.
- **Guided Discussion Circle** – Provide structured time to share feelings and listen respectfully.



High School Students

- **Open Dialogue Session** – Give space for thoughtful discussion while validating the need for different perspectives.
- **Creative Expression** – Encourage poetry, music, or art projects to process emotions.
- **Action-Oriented Activity** – Work on a group kindness project, such as letters of support, peer mentoring, or community service.

Resources

How to Help Your Students Cope With Safety Threats in the Community or World. (2025). Retrieved from <https://jedfoundation.org/how-to-help-students-cope-with-safety-threats/>

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Families and Educators. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/talking-to-children-about-violence-tips-for-families-and-educators>

Tips for Parents on Talking to Children Exposed to Violent Events. (2024). Retrieved from <https://violence.chop.edu/types-violence-involving-youth/school-shootings/tips-parents-talking-children-exposed-violent-events>

