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Talking to Your Child About the School Shooting in Newtown, CT

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Shock, disbelief, terror, all of these thoughts filled my mind, as I have family with young children in Newtown, CT. As this tragedy unfolded, and I found out that my family was safe; the relief was profound; and I grieved for those families who were not as fortunate as I.

This heartbreaking tragedy really strikes close to home for parents of young children. And, it's normal to worry about how to have a conversation with your child about this tragic event. I recommend that you frame it in such a way that you're not producing unnecessary anxiety for your child, but providing them with enough detail to satisfy their concerns. Similar to the terrorist attacks after 9/11, when children expressed fears about plane travel, or after the *Dark Night* shooting where children had worries about going to the movies, it would not be unusual for children to be afraid of going to school.

Here are my suggestions.

Let them know you are there to listen to their questions and concerns. Some children will talk and some won't. Both of these reactions are okay. What children need is reassurance that you are available to answer their questions when they are ready to discuss it.

When they do raise it, you can ask "What do you want to know about the shootings in the school in Newtown?" Keep your conversation age-appropriate.

Find out what frightens them and address it. Most children will want to know the bottom line — Will I be okay, will you be okay and is this going to happen again? Their emotions will vary based on their age, personality and their connection or proximity to this shooting. Also, keep in mind that trauma is cumulative in nature. So, if your child has experienced other traumas in their life, this tragedy may put them at risk for higher distress.

Stick to the facts. Children may have heard many different and possibly conflicting stories that could cause confusion for them. Be concrete. You can say "A young man, who we believe was mentally ill, walked into the school and shot his mother and other children and teachers at the school. He had a gun

and killed 27 people. He died too. We are not sure why he did it, but the police are trying to find out why he did this. It is very sad for all of us.”

Your child may then raise issues about death and what happens afterwards. Depending on your religious beliefs, you should answer these questions as best you can.

Monitor the TV and the Internet. If they want to watch the news, watch it with your child. Be an active participant in monitoring the type of information they receive. Most children under the age of six or seven should not be exposed to the media images of the event. I recommend that parents diligently monitor the TV, computer, social media, newspapers, etc. to make sure that children are not exposed to the graphic, violent repeats. You can't "unsee" something. My guess is that the media will be playing these upsetting, dramatic news clips many times over in the next few weeks as more is learned about the plot and the gunman.

There are many people working hard to keep them safe. Talk about the amazing efforts of the police, firemen, teachers, medical providers and people inside the school who helped others on that day. It's also good to let them know how everyone in the Newtown community banded together to support each other. Emphasize kindness.

Here are a few scenarios to think about.

If your child becomes upset after reading the newspaper, viewing social media or watching TV, encourage them to discuss their feelings. Normalize and validate them. Don't try to "correct" them. There is no right or wrong feelings and each child's will be different.

Younger children need to be reassured that this happened and it's horrible but that their parents are there to protect them and will do their best to always keep them out of harms way.

Children older than 12 need to be spoken to about the randomness of this event. They may be worried that they could have been in that school when this happened. They be very moody, depressed, anxious, possibly even cry. Acknowledge that the Sandy Hook School shooting makes many people very sad. It's completely understandable. You can discuss the fact that unfortunately, events happen that are traumatic and unpredictable but that we also have to be able to go on with our lives. Praise your child for being able to express their feelings. Then talk about what might make them feel better, for younger children, diverting them with play is helpful. For older children, it may be watching a comedy or a sports activity.

If your child asks "Was this person a terrorist?" you can tell them that a terrorist is someone who tries to hurt and scare people. They are trying to make people afraid. Terror is another word for being very scared. I would then add that there are not many terrorists in the world, but there are many good people in the world working hard to keep them safe.

Your child needs reassurance that he/she is safe and not in danger. This event was unprecedented and it is very rare that something of this magnitude happens in the United States.

If your child asks "Will it happen again?" you can tell them that "from the President of the U.S. to our local police and firemen, many steps are being taken to keep us safe. And, not just from shootings but from other threats too like fires, floods, and crime.

Family Emergency Plan. I recommend that you use this time as an opportunity to discuss your general emergency plan with your child. It will provide reassurance that you are keeping them as safe as possible. Calmly explain to your child you are ready for an emergency and have a plan that will keep them safe.

The components that you should cover are:

- Contact person(s) in case of an emergency. What will happen if they are in school or the movies and you are in work or separated from them. Who is the “go to” at that time?
- The meeting location if family members are separated.
- How to call 911 if an emergency happens in the home.
- Emergency supplies that you keep at home, medicine, money and a cell phone, canned food, water, flashlight, battery operated radio, first aid kit, etc.

Review the plan with your child when it is NOT an emergency so they can digest it and ask questions that may come up before an emergency arises.

Keep tabs on yourself. You probably have strong feelings about the school shooting too. It’s okay to share how you are feeling with your children. You will serve as a role model for them and reassure them that these hard conversations are possible.

For more information about keeping your child safe visit The NYSPCC’s website www.nyspcc.org