

Talking to Kids about Tragic Events or Civil Unrest

The School District of Clayton works to be proactive with about the physical safety and security of its students. Their emotional security is also a priority. The following might be helpful for you as parents/caregivers when talking with your children about tragic events or civil unrest. Even when children are not directly impacted by what is happening in the world, they may be unable to avoid exposure to the local and national conversation. Parents are left with many questions about what and how much to tell children and how to help them cope with the stress.

How do you talk to your kids about tragic events or civil unrest happening in our world?

When talking to children about tragic events or civil unrest, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- Try to be in charge of what and how your child learns about the event. Depending upon the age of your child, it is a good idea to limit children's exposure to traumatic news stories and images. Older children might use social media to communicate with their friends about events. It is important to monitor their interpretation of what is happening around them.
- When exposure is unavoidable, provide basic information about what happened at an age appropriate level. Brief, basic facts are typically appropriate for younger children, while older children and teens may have more questions. Don't overwhelm young children with too much information, but be sure to address questions as they arise.
- Do not assume that the child's worries and questions are the same as your own. Each child will understand and react differently. This will vary to some extent with age or developmental level, personality and pre-existing anxiety, and the manner in which the information is presented.
- Use open-ended statements and questions such as "Tell me what you know" and "What questions do you have?" rather than "Do you understand what happened?" and "Do you have any questions?" This will help you get a better sense of the child's understanding, worries and desire for more information. Adults and students will have differing opinions about the "right" or "wrong" of events happening around them. Possible messages/responses when students want your opinion:
 - "We need to work for peace in our community."
 - "I want you to be safe. "
 - "What can we do in the community to make sure we all get along?"
 - "We need to make sure everyone is treated with dignity and respect."
- Acknowledge the events in a calm way and provide reassurance about the child's own safety and security. Be honest – don't tell children something "could never happen" here, or to them – but minimize anxiety. Focus your ability and efforts to keep them safe from harm.
- Monitor your own emotions. Exposure to devastating news is upsetting and overwhelming for adults. It is natural to be emotional at times. However, children look to their parents and other significant adults for a sense of whether or not things are "o.k." Parents often serve as a child's "barometer" regarding their own safety and security. It is important for parents to manage their own stress level.

Why is school closed today?

- Your school wants to make sure you are safe. Since there is a possibility of a lot of people coming to Clayton, they think it's best that we not have school today. You will be back at school as soon as things quiet down.

Remember that many children have a difficult time talking directly about their concerns. Be sure to look for behavioral signs that your child may be distressed. These can include increased difficulty separating from parents, sleep or appetite disturbance, and withdrawal or "shutting down." Provide the opportunity to talk about worries, without forcing the child to talk.

References - NASP Online Resources

Talking to Children about Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/talkingviolence.pdf

Teaching Tolerance: Promoting Peace in Crisis

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/teaching-tolerance.aspx

Coping After a Crisis

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/PTSD%20NASSP%20January%202004.pdf>

Coping in Unsettling Times

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/unsettling_students.aspx

Managing School Crises: More Than Just Response

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/School%20Crisis%20NASSP%20May%202008.pdf>

School Safety and Violence Prevention

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/schoolsafety.aspx

Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/School-Based%20Mental%20Health%20Services%20NASSP%20Sept%202006.pdf>

Helpful Articles in the Literature (Note: Links are provided to the articles not in *School Psychology Review*)

Cooley-Strickland, M. R. Griffin, R. S., Darney, D., Otte, K., & Ko, J. (2011). Urban African American youth exposed to community violence: A school-based anxiety preventive intervention efficacy study. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community, 39*, 149-166.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3080109/>

Mazza, J. J., & Overstreet, S. (2000). Children and adolescents exposed to community violence: A mental health perspective for school psychologists. *School Psychology Review, 29*, 86-101.

Nickerson, A. B., & Slater, E. D. (2009). School and community violence and victimization as predictors of adolescent suicidal behavior. *School Psychology Review, 38*, 218-232.

Reyes-Chow, B. (2014). Talk with your kids about Ferguson.

<http://www.reyes-chow.com/2014/08/talk-with-your-kids-about-ferguson/>

Swaim, R. C., & Kelly, K. (2008). Efficacy of a randomized trial of a community and school-based anti-violence media intervention among small-town middle school youth. *Prevention Science, 9*, 202-214.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-008-0096-7/fulltext.html#Sec1>