

8 Suggestions for Talking to Your Kids About Mass Shootings

It was hard news to wake up to. My standard cup of coffee sat untouched as once again my friends' and family's conversations and attention revolved around another act of senseless violence, more innocent lives cut short. Throughout the day, the list of victims would grow, and my heart would ache along with the rest of the watching world.

Shutting the TV off, I wandered down the hall to wake my daughter for school. My thoughts shifted from processing what had happened in our country to protecting her from the brokenness of the world—a world that now involves lockdown drills and active shooter protocol.

When my husband and I were in middle school, we lined up a few times a year for routine fire drills and the occasional tornado drill. Today, schools are preparing students for what was once unimaginable. I listened one afternoon as my daughter talked about sitting quietly on one side of the classroom while the lights were out and the doors were locked from within.

When I asked what they did for an active shooter drill when they were in the courtyards, her response settled on me like a ton of bricks.

“Run,” she said.

When brokenness hits home

Talking to my kids, a middle schooler and a preschooler, about tragedies and violence doesn't come easily. How do I answer questions about things I don't understand myself? What do I say to restore their sense of safety and security when I don't feel safe letting them out of my sight?

Part of me wants to wrap my arms around my children and never let them wander out of the safety of our home. Here, I tell myself foolishly, they are

safe. Here, they are secure. But it isn't true. We live in a broken world. We're told this during Sunday sermons; we pray about this reality at our bedsides, and we read about the world's brokenness in our daily devotions. But then something happens to bring the brokenness home.

Maybe it's something the kids overhear on the radio or a news station. Or they hear devastating news from a friend. Wherever it comes from, this brokenness will eventually make its way through the doors of our homes and into the minds of our children.

At work that morning, as I expressed my fears for my own family, a coworker gently reminded me of something I had forgotten and desperately needed to hear: Don't risk missing an opportunity for sharing truth at the sake of protecting your kids.

We see the broken world creeping into our children's lives at times like this. We feel it in our bones as we pray hard for God to protect our little ones as we drop them off in front of their school. We see it in their eyes as they try to process what is going on around them and look to us for the "whys."

When we don't have all the answers

It's okay not to have all the answers. We won't. But it isn't okay to act like nothing is happening. Kids are far more perceptive than we think, and they need us, their parents, to talk about the hard things.

Reaching out to a few parents for wisdom, I gathered eight suggestions for speaking with your kids about mass shootings.

1. Turn them back to God.

When senseless, violent acts occur, we get a not-so-gentle reminder that our security is not in this world. When it comes to our children, we cannot be their ultimate refuge. That only comes from God, who sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to enter this broken world to give His life for us.

Remind them that while God allows people to make their own choices, good or bad, nothing surprises Him, and everything is still under His sovereign control. And while we may never know why He chooses to allow certain things, we do know that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). Even amid heartbreaking tragedy, God is working.

His children never have to wonder, “Where’s God when bad things happen?” He is right there beside us in our suffering: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

2. Keep conversations age-appropriate.

If they are young enough not to notice what is going on, don’t tell them. A toddler or preschooler is easily wrapped up in his own little world, and, for now, it is a safe and secure one. Don’t unnecessarily burden a child with something they are not old enough to process.

For a school-age child, what she doesn’t hear from you she will hear at school or elsewhere—from students, teachers, friends, even the local Christian radio station. A good place to start is by asking what she has already heard. Your conversations from there will depend on both the age of the child and their emotional maturity

3. Speak truthfully.

Don’t reassure your child that nothing bad will ever happen to them. Even at a very young age, children know this just isn’t true. Giving false hope will only deepen fear and insecurity. Instead, tell your children you will do everything you can to keep them safe. Remind them there are others in the community working toward keeping them safe as well.

Also, be ready to clear up any misinformation they hear. Rumors and lies meant to spread fear abound after devastating events like mass shootings. Let them know they can come to you with anything they hear. Tell them you

will be truthful with them (but that doesn't mean giving them information you don't think they are ready for).

4. Take a media break when the kids are around.

Images of the victims are hard for adults to take. Your children have no need to see them. Even radio stations might be discussing topics your child isn't ready for. Take this opportunity to take a break from media with the kids. Open your Bible and share some of your favorite passages with them instead. You can catch up on what's going on in the world when they aren't within view or earshot.

5. Remind them good still exists.

In 2012, the unthinkable happened in Newtown, Connecticut. As I struggled to let my kindergartener out of the car at school in the days that followed, I heard a quote from Fred Rogers, best known from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood: "When I was a boy and would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Since hearing this, I've looked for the helpers (or heroes) with my daughter. She always notices the first responders—the police, firemen, paramedics, etc.—who devote their lives to making people safe. Then there are the everyday people who lay down their lives for another, or the ones who give all their resources to help those who have lost so much.

Mr. Rogers's mother was right. There are always helpers.

6. Act in love.

Kids in Christian homes often hear a lot about being "the hands and feet of Jesus." Take this opportunity to put it into action. They've seen evil is a real thing in this world. Remind them of the truth Paul spoke in Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

If you are near to the devastation, take your kids with you to donate blood. Attend a prayer vigil or start one in your community. Let them see there is a need and that you are attempting to fill it. Talk to your kids about how they can help, whether it be a carwash fundraiser for victims' families or simply taking cookies to a neighbor. Spreading kindness helps "overcome evil with good."

7. Pray with them.

Let your children see you relying on the Prince of peace. Model for them how to take your worries, your burdens and fears, and give them to God through prayer. Ask God for His peace and comfort during times of tragedy. Take refuge in some of the last words Jesus told His disciples before His arrest, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

8. Trust God.

Maybe this one is as much for us parents as it is for our children. Beyond praying for my kids, the victims of these senseless, violent acts, and for my own peace of mind, I need to trust God. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10a). Will I choose to trust Him with my family, knowing He is ultimately in control? Or will I allow an act of evil to destroy my faith? I'm not saying it's easy to trust God when life is scary. But I want to choose to trust Him when the world seems to crumble around me.

That night, as I sat beside my daughter's bed, I asked if she had heard other kids talking about anything scary they had seen on the news or heard on the radio. She hadn't heard much, but she knew there had been a shooting and that lives were lost. Her first question was how close the tragedy was to our home town. Turns out it's 1,465.8 miles.

We didn't talk about how many people died. She didn't ask, so I didn't offer that information. She did ask why someone would do something so terrible. I told her I didn't know. Then I reminded her of the truth in the first point

above, that God really is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Even in events we can't make sense of.

She seemed content with that answer and changed the subject. I didn't push. Maybe she didn't want to hear more, or maybe, with her child-like faith, it was easier for her to accept that truth than it is for me at times. Either way, a little later she added the families of the victims into her prayers. She asked God to comfort them. And I know, because of His promise in Hebrews 13:5—"I will never leave you or forsake you"—He was there.

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