

How to Help Your Kids Process Tragic News



As a counselor, I'm often asked how to talk with kids about tragedies such as the latest school shooting. Here are some strategies I offer in my practice for intentional and effective conversations about tragedy.

We parents are forced to help our families maneuver tragic news more and more often. More specifically, we want to help kids process [tragic news](#). Consider this:

- News about COVID-19 outbreak.
- Since the 1999 Columbine High School shooting there have been 25 fatal school shootings.
- From 2000 to 2013, there were 160 mass shootings killing 486 people, according to the FBI.

We're forced to wrestle with what this means to a world that needs Christ. What's happened in our world? In our nation? In our hearts?

Practical Ways to Process With Your Family

Many kids ask, "Why did God allow this to happen?" or "Couldn't He have stopped this from happening?" As a counselor, I'm often asked how to talk with kids about tragedies such as the latest school shooting.

Here are some strategies I offer in my practice for intentional and effective conversations about tragedy and traumatizing news:

Talk to a Counselor

Focus on the Family offers a one-time complimentary consultation from a Christian perspective.

Reach a counselor at 1-855-771-HELP (4357)

Minimize exposure to news. Most young kids have difficulty processing what they see and hear on the news. Many assume what they see is happening nearby – in their minds the world isn't very big.

Look at the events through your child's eyes. Each child filters news differently according to his or her personality. Kids with more inhibited or anxious personalities may stay focused on worrying while others move toward thoughts of action or fixing. Taking time to understand how each child processes will help you craft your approach.

Pause and listen. Let your child ask questions. Put aside your own world to enter his as he tries to process information. If he feels anxious, reassure him with scriptures like [Psalm 56:3, Isaiah 26:3-4, Psalm 62:1-2 and Psalm 91:1-2.](#)

Pray together. Pray for everyone involved, the communities and the nation. Prayer truly gives a sense of peace for things we cannot control.

Practice empathy. Take time to have sorrow for the sin in the world and the pain it creates. Scripture tells us to mourn with those who mourn. [Psalm 147:3 says](#) “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” What would it mean to be brokenhearted and what does healing look like for them?

How Can I Expect Kids of Different Ages to React?

Age 0-3 — Young children feed off emotions they perceive. Turn off the news, or if your family wants to watch and discuss the stories, do it when your very young child is sleeping or out of earshot.

Age 4-8 — Most kids this age quickly move on to whatever is happening in their own lives. They don't need to watch the news because what happens on television seems real to them. They might ask if it will happen to them or if it happened at their school. Patiently respond to questions without details and reassure them of their present safety. Add some safe and loving touches if they are anxious.

Older kids in this age group may react by play acting a superhero, attacking the "bad guys." That's healthy. You may even want to join in.

Age 9-12 — This age group also processes events according to their own world. They'll wonder if this will happen at their school. News feeds are not helpful for this age group and can create anxiety or fascination with the stories.

Some kids, especially boys with more uninhibited personalities, may envision themselves being the hero and saving the world. Step into their imaginations with them as they try to resolve some of these issues.

Processing with Teens

This is where different personalities are especially evident:

- Doers want to protest or create new laws or programs.
- Talkers want ongoing discussions about what happened and the possible core issues.
- Thinkers process what they know about the tragedy and may form deep thoughts about solutions. This personality tends to be a bit more pessimistic and may make negative comments about the overall trustworthiness of people.

- Peacemakers would love for everyone to get along. They avoid conflict and political discussions. Because they can empathize with everyone involved, they make great prayer warriors.

Help your teen understand her or own personality and how it affects her information processing. Encourage her to be open to other points of view.

What Can Teens Do?

Kids, especially teens, want to know what to do in response to a tragedy. You may want to coach them in these ways when processing tragic news:

Pray. Prayer is a powerful weapon against evil. It's an opportunity to speak with our Heavenly Father. Talk about times God has answered prayer and the power we have in 24/7 access to the Creator of the universe.

Become wise consumers of media. There is graphic violence, sex and language in movies, television and video games. What does wisdom look like when it comes to media consumption? How does media impact us personally and in the culture as a whole?

Discuss what really is missing.

- Is it more laws? Speeding is illegal, yet people still speed. Alcohol is illegal for minors, yet some still drink.

- Is it love? How do we truly love one another? Loving God and putting Him first results in fruits of the Spirit, [but as Revelation 2:1-7 points out](#), we've abandoned our first love.
- Is there too much self-love? Culture constantly prompts us to ask "what's in it for me?" But the love God demonstrates is selfless. I believe He wants us learn to love ourselves as His children and become gifts to those around us. What does that look like in practice?

Explore the Concept of Movements

Movements give teens the opportunity to be influential right where they're at. They begin small and, properly nurtured, can create a chain reaction of Christ's love. Here's one example.

Rachel Scott, who died in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, wrote this challenge in her diary:

1. Look for the best in others.
2. Dream big.
3. Choose positive influences.
4. Speak with kindness.
5. Start your own chain reaction.

Some students at my 12-year-old daughter's school have taken on Rachel's challenge. Imagine if kids around the country did likewise!

Discuss the example set by Jesus and his disciples to pursue courage and influence rather than safety.

Final Thoughts on Helping Kids Process Tragic News

There are many opportunities to participate in something beyond ourselves. This can be a great project to do as a family.

Throughout history, God has shown us His presence through the love and unity that can follow tragedy. [Romans 12:21](#) reminds us, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” You can help your kids connect this biblical worldview as they process worldwide, nationwide, community-wide and family tragedies.

As you’re taking time to help your family, don’t forget to deal with your own emotions and struggles, too. For more resources to help kids process tragic news and families directly impacted by tragedy, check out our [Facing Tragedy section](#).

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About the Author



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Dr. Daniel Huerta is Vice President of Parenting and Youth for Focus on the Family, overseeing the ministry’s initiatives that equip moms and dads with

biblical principles and counsel for raising healthy, resilient children rooted in a thriving faith.

He is a psychologist, a licensed clinical social worker, and the author of [7 Traits of Effective Parenting](#). For many years, he has provided families with practical, biblically-based and research-based parenting advice on topics including media discernment, discipline, communication, mental health issues, conflict resolution, and healthy sexuality in the home. He is passionate about coming alongside parents as they raise contributors, instead of consumers, in a culture desperately in need of God's kingdom.

Dr. Huerta has been interviewed by various media outlets including Fox News, *Fatherly*, *Christianity Today*, *WORLD Magazine*, and CBN, and he is a frequent guest on Christian radio stations across the nation. He's also written for publications, including *The Washington Post*, on various topics related to marriage and parenting. He participated in the development of Focus on the Family's [Launch Into the Teen Years](#), a resource to help parents prepare their kids for adolescence, and he speaks regularly at retreats, conventions, and online events.

Dr. Huerta has maintained a private practice in Colorado Springs, Colorado since 2003 and has served families through Focus on the Family since 2004. He and his wife, Heather, have been married since 1997 and love being parents to their three teen children, Alex, Lexi, and Maci.

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*Link to original article

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