

Supporting Children and Teens Following a Tragic Event – Tips for Parents and Educators

When a tragic event or natural disaster happens, children and teens may feel confused, sad, angry, frightened or worried. It is important for adults to remain calm, think about the appropriate information to share, and reassure kids they are protected and safe.

The following tips may be helpful for educators and parents following a tragic event:

- Keep calm and in control. Children and teens are counting on adults to guide and help them with their reactions.
- It's okay to say how you are feeling, but remember to follow up with a hopeful message. Say the world is a safe place overall, and there is strength in community to overcome tragic events.
- Check in and listen. Ask children and teens what they know about the event; what they are thinking and feeling; and whether they have questions. There are no right or wrong ways to feel; people react differently. Some may remain quiet. Watch their behaviour for signs of distress, such as poor sleep or a change in mood, actions or appetite.
- Give children and teens opportunities to express their feelings through art, music or writing.
- Allow individuals to opt out of a discussion or activity. Some may not feel affected by the event, while others may find it too upsetting to discuss.
- Provide clear, factual information that is age appropriate. Don't provide more detail than the child or teen is requesting or is ready to hear.
- Be mindful not to stereotype people or countries. Listen for and correct any general statements of prejudice. Stop any bullying or teasing immediately. Remind kids that diversity is an important part of what makes Canada special.
- Limit the amount of media coverage that children and teens see. Watching events replayed on television can be overwhelming, especially for worriers. With older teens, it may be helpful to watch the news or read the paper together once, before discussing everyone's view of the events.
- Recognize that children and teens may be concerned about their own safety, and that of friends and family. Remind them tragic events are rare, and they can count on the adults around them to do their best to keep everyone safe. Do further safety planning together, if needed to reassure them.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible, to help them feel secure and view the world as more predictable.
- Pay special attention to children and teens suffering from a mental health problem and those who have experienced trauma and loss previously. Their reaction may be magnified, and they may need additional support.
- If you feel a child or teen needs support, ask the principal for a referral to a school board counsellor or mental health worker in the community.
- Take time for yourself to process your own emotions and concerns. Talk with family, friends and colleagues. If you feel overwhelmed, seek counselling.
- Make sure everyone gets enough sleep, exercise and nutritious food – yourself included.