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TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENCE AND OTHER SENSITIVE AND COMPLEX ISSUES IN THE WORLD

Adapted by Linda Lantieri
from A Discussion Guide for Parents and Educators
by Susan Jones and Sheldon Berman
Educators for Social Responsibility

A note from the editors at The Responsive Classroom: Teachers and parents often feel confused about how to handle children's questions about the violence that occurs in our world. We have found the following guide to be very helpful in answering teachers' and parents' most frequently asked questions about communicating with children about difficult issues in their wider world. Here, we reprint excerpts from this guide with permission from Educators for Social Responsibility.

What can schools, in cooperation with families and community, do to help children cope and bring about positive change?

Schools can help in a number of important ways. Above all else they can provide a safe, caring, and supportive environment for children to talk with each other about their thoughts and feelings. This helps children understand that they are not alone and that there are caring adults and other young people who share their concerns. Providing a caring network both at home and at school is reassuring to children and supports a normal level of functioning.

Secondly, schools can help young people overcome the sense of powerlessness that often arises in this kind of situation. Young people have many questions about violence and conflict in the world. Helping them pursue answers to these questions and helping them learn more about ways they can deal with conflict creatively is empowering to young people. They gain confidence in their ability to understand what is going on around them, to acquire information from a variety of sources, to appreciate divergent perspectives, and to learn about complex issues.

Thirdly, schools can help prevent the emergence of dehumanization, prejudice, stereotyping, and victimization of any group. Schools can help young people manage their emotions, resolve conflict, and interrupt prejudice. But even more important, they can demonstrate ways that children can support each other and respect each other's backgrounds and perspectives. By helping young people understand the human consequences of violence in any form, schools can help them become more sensitive to other people's feelings and points of view.

How can I judge if a child is ready to talk about difficult events?

Most children from age four to five and above would appreciate talking with adults they trust. In the media there is daily discussion of various tragedies, and it is unlikely that children know nothing at all about them. However, it is quite likely that they have some confusion about the facts and the dangers, and that they have mistaken information, questions, and some strong feelings. Often children are hesitant to share their questions and fears with adults. For this reason, we recommend that adults open the way for children to talk about their concerns.

How do I open up the subject with children?

The key word here is LISTEN. Most experts agree that it is best NOT to open up a conversation with children by giving them a lecture—even an informal, introductory lecture—on the particular tragedy that is on the news. Don't burden children with information they may not be ready for. The best approach is to listen carefully to children's spontaneous questions and comments, and then respond to them in an appropriate, supportive way. Let children's concerns, in their own words, guide the direction of the discussion.

Won't it just scare children more if we talk about it?

No, not if you listen to children and respond in a supportive, sensitive way to what you hear. No matter how frightening some feelings are, it is far more frightening to think that no one is willing to talk about them. If we communicate by our silence that this—or any other subject—is too scary or upsetting to talk about then the children, who depend on us, may experience the added fear that we are not able to take care of them. Young children especially need to feel secure in the knowledge that the adults in their lives can manage difficult topics and deep feelings.

What if children never bring up the subject? Should I just wait or is there something I can do?

Some children may not bring things up because they are genuinely not concerned; others may never bring up the subject even if it's on their minds; some are afraid of upsetting their parents or teachers by bringing it up; while others are too overwhelmed by their feelings to open up a discussion. As adults we can at least try to assess how they are feeling in order to decide whether a discussion is appropriate.

Children who are troubled but have difficulty talking about their concerns may need special attention. It can be helpful if we gently start the conversation ourselves. In reference to Littleton, you might ask a simple opening question such as, "Do you ever think about what happened in the high school in Colorado?" or, "How do you feel about what happened?" or, "What have you heard about the event in Colorado?" No matter what their response is, we need to listen—carefully and with care—to what our children have to say.

It feels so passive just to listen. Is it appropriate to tell children how I feel?

There are several pitfalls in sharing feelings about particular tragedies outright with children. A serious one is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and

fears for them, rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have. Another is that we might cut off the expression of what's on their minds and in their hearts as we get wrapped up in expressing what's on ours and miss hearing what children want to tell us. We might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying OUR need to "give" our children something rather than satisfying THEIR need to be heard and understood. We wouldn't want to communicate the message that what THEY have to say is not important.

This is not to say, however, that we need to be passive—good listening is a very active process. After we've listened carefully, it may then be appropriate for us to respond in ways that provide assurance that the adults in their lives care and are trying to promote peace. We may also want to say that we share some of the same feelings and remind children that we'll be together during these difficult times.

How can I listen to children in the most effective and helpful way?

As you listen to children, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from THEIR point of view. Don't make judgments about what they say no matter how silly or illogical it may sound to you at first. If you don't understand something, ask them to explain it. Show your respect for them and their ideas.

As parents, teachers and caregivers know, children are not always able to express what they mean or what they feel, and what they say doesn't always mean the same thing for them as it does for adults. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what's going on behind the initial words they utter. Comments such as, "That's interesting, can you tell me more about it?" or, "What exactly do you mean by that...?" are examples of ways to elicit more information from children without judging the rightness or wrongness of what they are saying.

If they seem to be struggling to make something clear, it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarize and focus their concerns. For example, you might say, "It sounds to me as if you have heard some horrible stories about the effects of the shooting in Colorado and you want to know if they're true." Clarifying questions and statements help children sort out their ideas and feelings without interfering with their thinking process. Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may NOT be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages—facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, posture, tone of voice, or others—which indicate that strong emotions may be present.

It is reassuring to children to have adults acknowledge that their feelings are okay. A comment such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I think I know how you feel because I feel sad too," tells a child that the feelings are not only normal and understandable, but also that you have similar feelings and are still able to cope.

What if children don't want to talk about these issues?

If you ask good opening questions and the child clearly isn't interested in talking about certain issues, then don't push. Again, it's important for us to communicate to children our respect for

how they feel. This extends to respecting their right NOT to talk about something they don't feel ready to talk about. There are some children who simply aren't concerned about these things and there's no reason to force them into this awareness.

Some children are reluctant to talk about tragedies because their feelings of fear and confusion overwhelm them, or because they don't feel confident that adults will be able to hear their concerns and respond to them in a way that makes sense. Adolescents may be more reluctant to talk if they perceive their parents and/or teachers having different opinions. They may think that the adults in their lives will try to impose their beliefs on them. These young people need to know that the doors to communication are open when they are ready. One way to let them know this might be to say something like, "Are kids talking about what happened in Colorado? I'd be really interested in hearing about what you and your friends think. Let me know if you want to talk."

Be aware of signals young children send out through their play, their drawing and writing, their spontaneous conversation, and other ways they might communicate about their preoccupations. Young children often use their play to work out what they are hearing, and observing them as they play can give us important clues about their thoughts and feelings. Similarly, if you observe children drawing one violent scene after another, overhear conversations where they seem unnaturally concerned with violence and hopelessness, if your children seem in any way preoccupied with images of destruction, then it is appropriate for you to let them know that you have noticed this and that you wonder what it means. Use your own judgment, and LISTEN attentively to what they have to say.

Once you have really listened to what is on children's minds, you will be in a far better position to respond to them.

How do I deal with the different emotions that children may have about these issues?

It is natural and healthy for there to be a wide range of emotions about any particular tragedy. Some children will be sad, anxious and even fearful for their own family's safety, others will be confused about how to make sense of the events, and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions—fear, sorrow, and worry, for example.

Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary school children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary and middle school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation. Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide

reassurance, while in other areas our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

After I have listened to children's concerns, how do I respond? Should I give them facts?

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what's on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and help them distinguish fantasy from reality. When we have listened to what they think and feel, we can gently correct their misinformation by statements about what happened in Littleton like, "By the way, it isn't true that this has happened in lots of other schools."

We can also answer children's direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. A child who asks, "How did the children die?" or, "What does pipe bombs mean?" deserves a factual answer.

If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent—underlying confusions or unexpressed anxiety—then ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's questions.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not clear and straightforward. When children ask such questions as, "Why did these boys do this?" we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another. It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict.

How can I talk with children if I feel that my own grasp of the facts and issues is inadequate?

Fortunately, we don't need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers. When older children ask for information we don't have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together." The process of figuring out where to get the information, and going through the steps to obtain it, can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child's questions don't lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, "I don't know the answer to that and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many good thinkers throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

How can I reassure and comfort children when I honestly don't feel hopeful myself?

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group isn't practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

What can I say that is both comforting and reassuring?

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to hear calmly, even their wildest concerns, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they do not have to be alone with their concerns.

You can also help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer, and that the most effective antidote to anxiety, fear or powerlessness is action. Engage them in a conversation about the way in which their school is working to make it a more peaceful place and explore ways in which they might be an active part of the effort to create a peaceful community in their school, home and neighborhood.

What if children seem to have excessive fears that seem to be focused on the tragedy? (nightmares, obsession with violence, and weapons, etc.)

Deep feelings of sadness, anxiety, and confusion are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. Children with "extreme" concerns need to be listened to and understood the same way that children with "normal" concerns do. It may be more difficult for the adults closest to them to help them put their strong feelings into words. When children are troubled and their parents and teachers have difficulty helping them sort the trouble out—no matter what the issue—it may make sense to seek professional help. The problem may be as simple as untangling a particularly frightening bit of misinformation. But, if you have doubts about what a child's fears mean, or how to help the child deal with them, we strongly encourage you to consult a counselor or other professional trained in this area.

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