

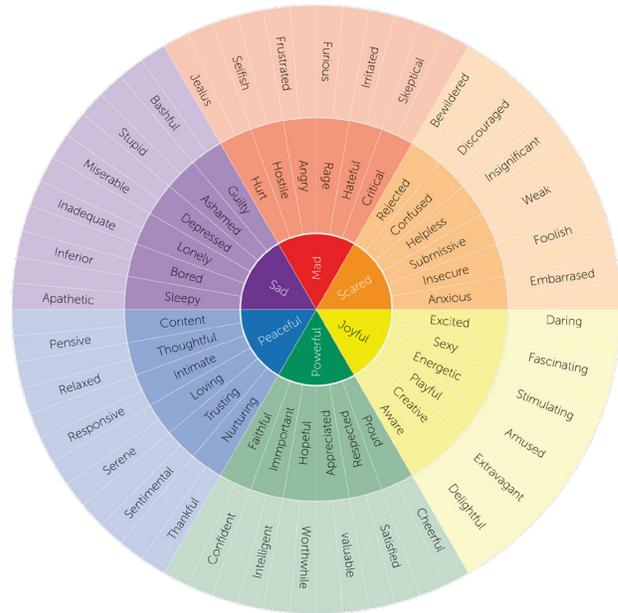


How To Talk to Young People in the Aftermath of Shootings

As a Trusted Adult in a young person’s life, you are in a unique position to create a safe space to discuss and process tragedies. Below are some tips and strategies for engaging young people in a dialogue after a school shooting.

Before you talk to a child or teenager

Do a personal check-in about your own feelings and past trauma with gun violence. Anticipate some of the emotions and opinions that may come up with the young person(s) during the discussion. The first step as a Trusted Adult is to ensure you have a healthy mindset and space to engage in a courageous conversation with a young person. Use a [feelings inventory](#) or emotions wheel as a tool for a personal check-in. Model how you use this tool and convey and regulate emotions and feelings with the young person(s).



[Feeling Wheel, CC BY-SA 4.0](#) , via Wikimedia Commons

Ten tips for communicating compassionately and authentically with young people

1. Create an environment for an open dialogue. Establish a judgement-free zone and listen with an open heart.
2. Invite your young person(s) to select a space that feels safe and comfortable. If you’re in a classroom or school setting, set up a comforting space that isn’t too formal. Make sure that your own technology devices are put away in order to be fully present. If possible, place some soothing or stress-reducing items in the space that a student can use for comfort. Stress balls, stuffed animals, and mindfulness jars are examples.
3. Be authentic about your own experiences and feelings about gun violence.
4. Check in with how the young person is feeling at the beginning and end of the conversation.
5. Mirror how to express your own feelings. Convey your emotions and open the doorway for the young person(s) to share their own thoughts, opinions, and feelings. If you need a place to start, try one of the following sentences to launch your discussion.

- a) I feel angry and sad that I need to discuss such a traumatic event with you. How are you feeling?
- b) I feel anxious whenever I learn about another mass shooting. What is going on in your heart and mind?
- c) As a teacher, I feel frightened by the threat of school shootings. What is it like for you as a student?
- d) As a parent/guardian, I feel overwhelmed by the number of mass shootings that happen in our country. When I feel overwhelmed I take a couple of slow, deep breaths. What helps you?
- e) I feel saddened that this type of tragedy keeps happening. Is there a word that describes how you’re feeling right now?



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6. Place no judgment on a young person for the emotions and affect they express (or do not express) during the conversation.
7. Don't try to fix or solve emotions, reactions, or problems. Simply acknowledge and support the young person(s) through any unpleasant emotions, reactions, or problems.
8. Refrain from making statements such as:
 - Don't be upset.
 - Why are you so quiet about this? It's serious.
 - Stop making such a big deal about this, it doesn't affect you.

Instead, use caring and reflective listening statements, especially when you are uncertain what to say.

- I really hear you. This is very upsetting.
 - I appreciate you being here with me to talk through this issue.
 - I feel frustrated, sad, and in disbelief that you and your friends have to deal with such a major life stressor and fear.
9. Try not to project your own feelings about the topics onto the young person. Own your own feelings and be caring and authentic. However, don't try and push or convince your young person to feel the same way as you do.
 10. End the conversation by helping the young person(s) feel grounded, safe, and supported. Reassure them that they are safe with you at that moment. Plan to provide an optimistic closure to the discussion with words of empowerment to the young person(s). Sample statements you can use are:
 - a) *That was a courageous conversation. Thank you for being so open to talking and listening.*
 - b) *Remember, my door is always open if you'd like to discuss this topic again.*
 - c) *This was a heavy conversation and I appreciate your willingness to talk to me today. Make sure you spend time with someone you care about today.*
 - d) *Thanks for being here with me today to have this critical conversation.*
 - e) *Please remember to connect with Trusted Adults at school and home. You are surrounded by a community of care.*

Some Questions That May Come Up During the Discussion

1. *Why is so much gun violence happening?*

Young people may ask questions about gun violence and laws. Be prepared with some data and facts.



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2. *I am just a kid, how can I make a difference? What can I do to help and make our society safer?*

Empower young people with tools and ways they can use their agency to make a difference. [Knowing the signs](#) and telling a Trusted Adult if warning signs are encountered. They are empowered to be Upstanders.

Other strategies and resources for talking to young people about school shootings

For Educators and SAVE Promise Clubs:

- Facilitate a Circle Up discussion to process tragedies. A Circle Up discussion guide is provided [here](#).

For Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers:

- Take a walk in nature or sit in a park. Remove yourselves from the distractions of daily life, such as smartphones and television.
- Provide drawing paper and pens/crayons/markers/paint. Sit side-by-side and draw or doodle as you discuss the tragedy. This is especially effective with younger children.
- Read Amanda Gorman's [poem](#) together and use it as a springboard for the discussion. Invite the young person(s) to write or create their own spoken word as an expression of feelings and voice.
- Use a quiet game like dominoes or chess to initiate a conversation.
- Maintain important routines like dinner time.
- Sign up together to volunteer for a violence prevention organization in your community.

A Special Note About Trauma

By listening to the young person in a non-judgmental and compassionate way, you are on the way to a trauma-informed technique.

Gun violence is an epidemic in America. For many young people, gun violence is a part of the daily experience and many young people carry trauma due to direct or indirect experience of gun violence. Adults are also carrying trauma and may also be experiencing a traumatic response.

Here are a few procedures for setting up an environment that is trauma-informed:

1. Establish a comfortable setting when discussing gun violence.
2. Provide simple self-soothing or emotion regulation strategies that students can use at any time. For example, a mindful breathing technique or a calm corner set up with headphones/music, coloring books and supplies, and comfy seating.
3. Communicate clearly that if a student does not feel safe or experiences a sudden onset of stress, there are supports, including a dedicated counseling staff person or mental health professional, available to connect with and lean on for support.



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4. Reassure students that any and all feelings are valid. Some students may feel sad, angry, or have no immediate feelings or emotional reactions at all. Each experience is individual and there is no “right” way to feel or react to the video and discussion.
5. Refrain from making participation in the discussion mandatory.
6. Acknowledge students who support and affirm one another during difficult and emotional conversations.
7. Let students know that they may think about the tragedy or discussion later in the day and experience difficult or unpleasant emotions. If this occurs, provide information on how and where they can find support from a Trusted Adult.
8. Encourage young people to spend intentional time away from technology. As a Trusted Adult, model how you put away your phone, turn off the television, and disconnect from the news and social media.
9. Provide closure to the discussion and lesson by sharing stories of hope.

For more information about childhood trauma, types of trauma, and resources on how to support students who have experienced trauma, visit [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](https://nctsn.org).