NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Parent Guidelines for Helping Youth after the Recent Shooting

The recent shooting has been an extremely frightening experience, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. Your children and family will recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and community. But families and youth may have had different experiences during and after the shooting, including those who may experienced physical injury, involvement in police investigation, worry about the safety of family members and friends, and loss of loved ones. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to you and your family during and after this event. Some adults and children have been seriously injured and will require medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Over time, some youth and adults will return to normal routines, while others may struggle. Children and teens may react differently to the shooting depending on their age and prior experiences. Expect that youth may respond in different ways, and be supportive and understanding of different reactions, even when you are having your own reactions and difficulties.

Children's and teen's reactions to the shooting are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers respond to the event. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common after mass violence. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your children.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others
- Fears that another shooting may occur
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increase in activity level
  - Decrease in concentration and attention
  - Increase in irritability and anger
  - Sadness, grief, and/or withdrawal
  - Radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future
  - Increases or decreases in sleep and appetite
  - Engaging in harmful habits like drinking, using drugs, or doing things that are harmful to self or others
  - Lack of interest in usual activities, including how they spend time with friends
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school and work-related habits and behavior with peers and family
- Staying focused on the shooting (talking repeatedly about it)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the shooting (seeing friends who were also present during shooting, media images, smoke, police, memorials)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (loud noises, screaming)

Things I Can Do for Myself

- **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep and exercise.
- **Help each other.** Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or support each other.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.
- **Give yourself a break.** Take time to rest and do things that you like to do.

Things I Can Do for My Child

- **Spend time talking with your children.** Let them know that they are welcome to ask questions and express their concerns and feelings. You should remain open to answering new questions and providing helpful information and support. You might not know all the answers and it is OK to say that. At the same time, don't push them to talk if they don't want to. Let them know you are available when they are ready.
- **Find time to have these conversations.** Use time such as when you eat together or sit together in the evening to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Try not to have these conversations close to bedtime, as this is the time for resting.
- **Promote your children's self-care.** Help children by encouraging them to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest and exercise. Let them know it is OK to take a break from talking with others about the recent attacks or from participating in any of the memorial events.
- **Help children feel safe.** Talk with children about their concerns over safety and discuss changes that are occurring in the community to promote safety. Encourage your child to voice their concerns to you or to teachers at school.
- **Maintain expectations or "rules."** Stick with family rules, such as curfews, checking in with you while with friends, and keeping up with homework and chores. On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where teens are going and what they are planning to do to monitor how they are doing. Assure them that the extra check-in is temporary, just until things stabilize.
- **Address acting out behaviors.** Help children/teens understand that "acting out" behaviors are a dangerous way to express strong feelings over what happened. Examples of "acting out include intentionally cutting oneself, driving recklessly, engaging in unprotected sex, and abusing drugs or alcohol. You can say something like, "Many children and adults feel out of control and angry right now. They might even think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way - but it's not a good idea to act on it." Talk with children about other ways of coping with these feelings (distraction, exercise, writing in a journal, spending time with others).
- **Limit media exposure**. Protect your child from too much media coverage about the attacks, including on the Internet, radio, television, or other technologies (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter). Explain to them that media coverage and social media technologies can trigger fears of the attacks happening again and also spread rumors. Let them know they can distract themselves with another activity or that they can talk to you about how they are feeling.

- **Be patient.** Children may be more distracted and need added help with chores or homework once school is in session.
- **Address withdrawal/shame/guilt feelings.** Explain that these feelings are common and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done. Reassure them that they did not cause any of the deaths and that it was not a punishment for anything that anyone did "wrong." You can say, "Many children, and even adults, feel like you do. They are angry and blame themselves, thinking they could have done more. You're not at fault. There was nothing more you could have done."
- **Manage reminders**. Help children identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. When children experience a reminder, they can say to themselves, "I am upset because I am reminded of the shooting because the potato chip bag popped. But now there is no shooting and I am safe." Some reminders may be related to the loss of friends and/or family (photos of the person, music listened to together, locations of time spent together). Help your child cope with these loss reminders and provide them extra comfort during these times.
- **Monitor changes in relationships.** Explain to children that strains on relationships are expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during this time. Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Encourage tolerance for how your family and friends may be recovering or feeling differently. Accept responsibility for your own feelings, by saying "I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I was having a bad day."
- **Address radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future**. Explain to children that changes in people's attitudes are common and tend to be temporary after a tragedy like this. These feelings can include feeling scared, angry, and sometimes revengeful. Find other ways to make them feel more in control and talk about their feelings.
- **Get adults in your children's life involved.** If there has been a serious injury, death in the family, death of a close friend, or if your child is having difficulties, let your child's teacher or other caring adults know so that they can be of help.
- **Empower your child to get involved in their medical care.** For children or teens with injuries and long-term medical needs, encourage them to participate in medical discussions and decisions as much as possible. Have them ask their own questions and give opinions about different procedures. Teens are especially concerned about their physical appearance, fitting in, and their privacy. Talk with them about their concerns, problem-solve ways to address them, and respect their privacy.
- **Seek professional help.** If teens have continued difficulties for a couple of months after the attacks, parents should consult a trusted helper—a doctor or mental health professional.