



How to Talk to Your Child about a Scary Event

There is no easy way to talk to your child about a scary event, whether it is an act of terrorism or a natural disaster or violence in the community. But, talking to your child is one of the most important things you can do as a caring adult.

Don't be afraid to talk to your child about scary topics. Even if you are scared yourself, stay calm and open to questions. Your child is likely to be comforted by your interest in and caring answers to his or her questions.

Where should I talk to my child about a scary event?

It is best to talk to your child about a scary event in a comfortable, quiet place with few distractions.

How do I talk to my child about a scary event?

No matter how old your child is, he or she is going to want to know:

- **What does this mean to me?**
- **Will my family and I be safe?**

How and what you tell your child should depend on his or her age.

If your child is age 12 or younger:

- **Tell your child what happened. It is important that they hear it from you.**
 - ❖ **For children ages 8 and younger**, keep the story as broad and simple as possible. For example, if talking about the Boston Marathon tragedy, you may say, "There were explosions at the marathon and some people were hurt."
 - ❖ **For children over the age of 8**, you can give some facts about the event. For example, if talking about the Boston Marathon tragedy, you may say, "There were two bombs that went off. There were serious injuries. We do not know who did it."

- **Limit your child's exposure to the media.** Images from the event can be disturbing to your child, especially when viewed repeatedly.
- **Keep up normal routines**, if you can.
- **Spend extra time with your child and tell them you love them.** Hugs are also helpful!
- **Let them know that you, and other helping adults, are working all the time to keep them safe.**
Talk about some of the ways you do this.



Limit how much TV your child watches about an event.



Extra hugs can help your child feel safe.

If your child is older than 12:

- **Ask your child what he or she knows about the event;** then correct any inaccuracies or misconceptions.
- **Expect an open and honest talk.** Be ready for whatever your child wants to discuss.
- **Listen respectfully**, even if your child has beliefs unlike your own.
- **Talk with your child about what people are doing, and planning on doing, to keep people like her safe** (for example: increased police presence).



Expect an in-depth talk with your older child.

What are the signs of a child coping with a scary event?

Your child may have some brief signs of stress. As long as these are short-lived, they should not be signs of more serious problems.

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Should these symptoms last more than a week or two, or interfere with your child's daily life in a significant way, you should think about speaking with her main doctor or a mental health professional.

Symptoms may include:

- Anger
- Moodiness
- Clinginess
- Nightmares
- Bedwetting
- Whining
- Tearfulness
- Easily annoyed
- Trouble with schoolwork



Stress can affect schoolwork.

Is it okay for my child to act out a scary event?

In addition to talking, your younger child may find it comforting to act out an event through play. This can give your child a sense of power over her environment. While this is okay, be ready to talk to your child about it when it's the right time.

What can I do to help?

When a tragedy takes place, sometimes you and your child feel helpless. To help that feeling, and teach your child compassion, here are some things your family can do:

- **Give donations** to disaster relief organizations
- **Donate blood** to the American Red Cross or local hospitals
- **Go to religious services or memorial observances**
- **Organize or donate to a clothing or food drive**

Where I can I find more about talking to my child about a scary event?

For more information, visit:

- **After the Trauma: Helping My Child Cope:**
http://healthcaretoolbox.org/pdf/After_the_trauma_child.pdf
- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:**
www.aacap.org
- **American Academy of Pediatrics:**
www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx
- **American Psychological Association — Tips for Recovering from Disaster and Other Traumatic Events**
www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx
- **American Red Cross— Helping Children Cope with Disaster:**
www.fema.gov/pdf/library/children.pdf
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency — Coping with Disaster:**
www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Hotline Disaster Distress Helpline (24/7 phone and text):**
<http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/about.aspx>

Contact Us

To reach **Boston Children's Outpatient Psychiatry Service**, please call 617-355-6688.

For **additional questions or to schedule an appointment with Boston Children's Psychiatry Department**, please call 617-355-6680.