

What do I say to my children when bad things happen?

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Calgarians have been impacted by many tragic events. We are grieving, individually and as a community, for the senseless and horrible deaths and attacks on people and communities.

As parents, we wonder, "How can this sort of thing happen? Is my family safe? Is the world we live in safe?" We feel helpless, numb, terrified, angry, profoundly sad, and we ask ourselves "How do I handle this? Where to from here?"

Here are some things you can do for yourself and your family:

Take care

- Allow space to grieve, to feel the sadness and the pain. Your world has been shaken and it is a normal reaction to feel sad, scared, angry and vulnerable.
- What do you need? How do you look after yourself? Do you remember to breathe?

Do you allow yourself to put everything aside for a few minutes to do something that feels good? It does not have to be big: deep calm breathing stretches, sitting down for 10 minutes to drink a cup of tea or coffee, a 10-minute phone conversation with a friend, a walk in nature. These are all examples of how we can maintain or increase our well-being and they will be different for each of us. What is in your well-being toolkit?

Do I talk to my children about this? If so, what should I tell them?

- **WHY?** If they have seen or heard information about it, it is important that you discuss this with them. If they are not aware of particular events, you may want to address the fear or anxiety it has created in you in a less direct way.

If you are affected, they likely are too because they sense your sadness, your anxiety, etc. They may feel you more distant or preoccupied as well. It provides an opportunity to talk about safety and what we do to keep ourselves safe.

- **WHO?** The news is all over media and social media. Is your child or teen on social media? Might your child's friends talk about the news with your child? We do not want our children to feel scared and vulnerable by hearing of bad news without the support and reassurance of family. It is best for children to hear bad news directly from their parents/caregivers. It strengthens the trust between child and parents/caregivers. Avoid watching the news in your children's presence and limit your own exposure. Keep in mind that images are very powerful and tend to be more difficult to let go of than a story we hear or read. We also respond differently to news depending on our state of mind.
- **WHEN?** It is probably best to do it sooner rather than later unless you are fairly certain that your child will not be exposed to this topic from other sources. You may start a conversation in response to your child/teen's questions or could use presenting opportunities (e.g., discussions about crossing the street in safe way, reminding them to call you to let you know where they are) to start a conversation.
- **HOW?** Remain calm. Children will take their cue from our tone of voice and body language. Choose a time when you can cuddle or just hang out with them or reach out to touch their hand for reassurance. Avoid having a difficult conversation while rushing out the door or at bedtime. Their mind may rest of that difficult news and it can impact their sleep.

They may also associate bad news and bad feelings with bedtime and this may lead them to avoid going to sleep. Keep conversations short, put the focus on reassurance and make time to talk about good things too, or at least one good thing, that happened during the day or that they wish to happen the next day.

- **WHAT?** Tell them as little as possible. Answer their questions without giving more information than what they are asking. “Did people die? “Yes, some people did die”. “Why did this person shoot those people?” “I don’t know why, but I find it scary and awful”.

Give reassurance, but be careful not to make promises that you cannot keep. It is perfectly acceptable to say that these are rare events. Talk about what systems you have at home to stay safe, for example, holding hands before crossing the street, or always letting mom and dad know where you are. Including in the discussion other safety measures and systems we implement in our daily lives help children/teens feel safe.

Be careful not to say, “We’ll always be there to protect you” or “this will never happen here”. While we wish we could make these promises, we simply cannot. We risk losing our children’s trust if something happens and we are not able to protect them.

This “feeling safe” conversation is one you may need to have again and again. Don’t impose it and don’t overcrowd your children. Terrible events in our lives, community and beyond remind us that life is precious. How do we hold our children tight while giving them space to discover the world and themselves? Isn’t it the question we ask ourselves every day?