

Talking with children about national tragedies

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

With our televisions and computer screens filled with stories about mass shootings and terrorist attacks, parents often wonder what to tell their children. How much information is too much? What's the best way to help our children understand these terrible events? Can we teach them how to protect themselves emotionally?

For insight, I turned to Dr. Erica Pierce-Zapata, a clinical psychologist raised in Pendleton and mother of seven children ages 1 to 17. She currently lives in California, where she is completing post-doctoral work in neuropsychology.

Regarding what to tell children about tragic events, Dr. Zapata makes four key points:

- Tell the truth.
- Be age-appropriate for your child.
- Provide children the ability to discuss such events with you.
- Teach them to be prepared and help them feel safe.

Children should not be sheltered from the reality of the world around them but rather taught that good and bad both exist in



the world. According to Dr. Zapata, "The sensationalizing that happens with social media can also lead to de-sensitization and general acceptance that such tragedies are a normal occurrence to be accepted."

This is why she feels it is important to have open and honest conversation with your children. Discussion should always be age-appropriate dependent upon the age and maturity of your child; you wouldn't tell a five-year-old

the same things you would a twelve-year-old. Often, the best approach is just to open the discussion and allow the child to dictate how in-depth the conversation will be. By talking casually, provide opportunities for children to express their thoughts and explore the realities of each situation. It is most important to help them feel safe.

Ensure they understand that these are not ordinary events and that they really do not have to fear being in that type of situation. Explain that we are all vulnerable to accidents and tragedy sometimes – that is part of life – yet we are more likely to be involved in a car accident than a mass shooting.

This provides a teaching moment to show our children how to be aware and prepared, and let them know it's critical to be aware of their surroundings when something doesn't feel right. Teach them that intuition is important and that if they overhear or sense something they need to bring it to the attention of someone who can investigate. This is the best way to prevent tragedies from happening. The key is to empower our children, not make them fearful.



Strategies

Talking about tragedies should also include discussion regarding how such events affect the people involved, their families, communities and our society as a whole. Rather than avoiding a discussion, use the child's questions and feelings to help them become more secure in their own ability to influence their environment. Confidence will encourage them to speak up when they need to. According to Dr. Zapata, discussion offers an opportunity to teach your children to be socially responsive and proactive members of our communities, effecting positive social change.

As parents, we have many opportunities for teaching moments, chances to help our children strengthen their own resolve and live a full life without unnecessary fears. The biggest hurdle may be the struggle we adults face in trying understand these tragedies ourselves.

Pendleton home economist Virginia Justice and her husband have two college-aged daughters.

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