

A guide for helping children in traumatic times

From the Office of Child Advocacy PC(USA)
www.pcusa.org/children

Help young children talk about their scary feelings

The staff of the PBS children's program, Fred Rogers' Neighborhood, offers some helpful insights about how young children respond to tragedies like the shootings at Virginia Tech. They point out that despite what parents and other adults may think, young children are often quite aware of a traumatic news event such as this week's tragedy. The staff also suggests that young children need permission to talk about their fears. Here are some helpful tips for adults who care for young children:

- 1. Determine what your child knows:** If your young child mentions the shootings, find out what he or she knows about it. A child's fantasies are often very different from the actual truth.
- 2. Listen carefully:** Remember that a young child's thought processes are quite different from your own. One little girl became increasingly distraught as she asked her parent, "What will happen to me if you die?" The parent repeatedly told the child that a relative in another state would take good care of her, but this did not calm the child's fears. Finally the child asked, "But who will take me to Grandma's house in Arkansas? The parent was then able to assure the child that if her parents died and she was all alone in the house, she could walk next door to a neighbor's and that neighbor would call a church member to come and pick the child up.
- 3. Respect a child's concerns:** A young child's concerns about being shot may seem farfetched to an adult. But taking such a concern seriously can assure your child that he or she can talk about anything with you.
- 4. Assure a child of adults' protection:** Your child needs to hear that you will do everything you can to keep her safe and to help her grow. We can't promise that nothing bad will ever happen to a child, but we can promise to do our best to be there for her.
- 5. Find the helpers:** When Fred Rogers was a boy and would see scary things on the news, his mother would say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

For more helpful information about helping young children deal with tragic events in the news, visit the PBS kids Web site at <http://pbskids.org/rogers/parentsteachers/special/scarynews-thoughts.html>.

Help elementary children deal with frightening events

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that children from ages eight to 17 spend an average of nearly six and a half hours a day engaged in media use, often using two or more forms of media at once (watching TV and text messaging a friend, playing a video game and listening to an MP3 player, and so forth)

Eight- to 12-year old children are saturated with media of all kinds, from music to television to the Internet to video games. Because they are usually quite savvy about using media, it's easy to forget that the content they are taking in may be overwhelming. When a tragedy such as the Virginia Tech shootings takes place, children are exposed to a barrage of information from all sides.

Elementary children are interested in information of all kinds. At home and at school, they are exposed to facts about a whole range of topics that touch their lives. But unlimited access to media may expose them to both information and misinformation, leaving them vulnerable to feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. They need the help of parents, teachers and other caring adults in evaluating the flood of information they are receiving and in assessing their own feelings. In addition to the tips listed above, here are some additional tips for helping older children deal with frightening situations

>Limit and monitor media exposure:

- **If your child has a computer in his or her room**, be extra vigilant in monitoring Internet use. After any tragedy of the magnitude of the recent shootings, cyberspace quickly fills with not only legitimate news accounts, but also with rumors, speculation and downright strange postings. Be particularly aware of the debates that may rage over the merits of gun ownership or gun control, or the kinds of racist comments that may be posted in chat rooms about the shooter.
- **If there is a TV in your child's room**, or if the TV is routinely on for most of the family's waking hours, make a point of watching TV coverage with your children. Be alert to questions a child has or comments he or she may make. After watching ask: What do you think? What person did you see offering help or assistance? Tell your children that Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has people in Blacksburg to provide support and assistance, and that the churches in that area are responding to the needs of those affected by the shootings.
- **If your child plays video games**, double-check the content of his or her favorites. Eight- to 10-year old boys spend more time gaming than any other age group from eight to 17. Some games are quite violent, and the degree of violence may not reveal itself until a player is deep into the

game. Be sure your child is not playing M-rated games. The content of some games mimics the kind of horrific carnage that took place this week, and the data is overwhelming that game violence adversely affects children. *Children and Violent Video Games* is a helpful booklet available for download at <http://www.pcusa.org/children/peace/education.htm> or in print form from Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS#72-651-06-001).

>Respond to the tragedy: Older elementary children not only need to identify the helpers in this situation, they have a strong need to make a difference themselves. Talk together about what they might do, such as send cards to the college campus or to one of the Presbyterian churches in the area or pray for the families of those who were shot. Now is also a good time to talk about the ways that make for peace rather than violence. When has your child felt left out, angry or upset, and how did he or she respond? What can we do to help children who are not safe from violence, such as children who live in areas where gun violence abounds or in war-torn parts of the world?

Because accounts of tragedies of the magnitude of Virginia Tech are immediately available to our children, they may get the impression that such events happen more frequently than they actually do. Talk with your children about what happened. Try to uncover their fears. Assure them that those who care about them will always do their best to ensure that they are safe.