



HOW TO BEGIN TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE

1. **What:** *Start the conversation.*

A powerful way to help children with neighborhood violence is to talk about it. You can bring it up in the way that feels comfortable to you. You might say something like, “You heard gunshots this morning. What do you think happened? How did it make you feel?”

Why: You won’t be introducing difficult feelings, because children are already thinking about it! Talking about it usually reduces the toxicity of traumatic events--after talking about it, children’s overwhelming feelings are often soothed. It helps them get “unstuck.” In the long term, talks like this will also help your child learn to soothe his/her own feelings.

2. **What:** *Don’t force a child to “talk about it.”*

Many children will say “I don’t want to talk about it.” How you respond is important: you want to let them know it’s their decision whether to talk about it *and* that talking about it can help them feel better. You can let them know you’ll be ready to listen if they want to talk later.

Why: Trauma often causes overwhelming feelings about not being able to control the situation. Letting children control when or if they talk helps counter this sense. Also, if they feel forced, they will be unlikely to feel you really understand or “get” them.

3. **What:** *Help children find words for their experience.*

Often children may be silent when you try to start the conversation. You can help them begin putting words to their feelings by guessing what they might be feeling, and then asking them if that is right. (e.g., “Maybe you feel sad! Do you think you might feel sad?”)

Why: Often when children shrug and fail to speak about their feelings, it’s not really that they don’t want to. It’s that they don’t know how or don’t feel it’s emotionally safe. Our society carries a lot of messages that it is NOT OK to talk about feelings, especially ones that might be considered weak (hurt, sadness, fear). When you start to speak about them you show children it’s OK and help them start to find words for their experience.

4. What: *Don't worry about having the answers--just face the problem together.*

Children may ask you why it happens. This is a massive and profound question. You don't have to have the answer! You might respond by saying, "I know, it is terrible. It hurts and it's scary. It's something that's very hard for anyone to understand."

Why?: Facing the problem together is the second best thing to fixing it. To face it together you need to look at the problem together. Your child can express what they see, think and feel and you can show you really hear and understand them.

5. What: *Show you hear and understand what he/she is saying.*

A good way to do this is to "mirror" what the child says. Mirroring is repeating back to the child what they said to you--think of it as providing a reflection so the child can see him/herself. You may want to say it in your own words but you can also simply repeat the child's words.

Why?: It may seem silly, and you might fear you sound like a parrot, but mirroring really helps children know you are listening. It also helps the child understand him/herself--it shows the child's feelings and thoughts are important, and this helps the child remember and understand how s/he feels. Merely hearing you repeat their words helps children know and accept how they feel and think.

6. What: *It's OK for you to have feelings too.*

If your feelings are overwhelming you that is not a good time to have this talk with the child. But if you can stay calm while feeling your feelings, you can share some basic feelings with your child. ("It makes me mad/sad/scared too.")

Why?: This can show the child that everyone has feelings, making the child feel normal. It can help create the sense that you are facing the hard stuff together, because you're having feelings alongside the child. It also gives hope that these feelings won't always be overwhelming.