**How to Talk to Children about School Shootings**

School shootings raise questions that adults find very difficult to answer, including questions like “Why does this happen?” and “Are my children safe?” When it comes to children’s questions, finding an answer can be even more tricky. As a result, parents may find themselves answering in extremes, either wanting only to provide reassurance or avoiding tough questions altogether.

Nikki, a therapist at Jewish Family Services in Milwaukee who works with adult survivors of violence, offers this advice to parents on how to respond to children’s reactions and questions about school shootings. “It is important to acknowledge the situation to your kids and give them space to process what has happened.” Nikki emphasizes that affirming your child’s emotions and further acknowledging “it’s big and scary, and yes, it happened” will help kids see that these emotions are normal and that adults also get emotional about these horrible situations.

“Grieving is a part of trauma that we tend to gloss over too quickly,” Nikki explains. “There can be a loss experienced for children who hear about these school shootings. This may be a loss of innocence, a loss of a sense of safety, or a loss in terms of how the child has seen the world up to this point.” Nikki encourages parents to accept these feelings of loss within their child, as it helps the child not feel so alone while dealing with a scary reality.

While parents should create the space to talk with their child about their feelings related to school shootings, it is also critical, especially with younger children, that parents allow the child to guide the conversation. The extent of information that is provided should be age appropriate and fall within the child’s line of questioning and knowledge about the situation. Additionally, parents should make themselves aware of how much media consumption their child has following a tragedy such as a school shooting, as they may need to limit exposure. Often, media will be filled with disturbing images that undermine the reality that schools are still very safe.

For older children and teenagers, becoming proactive may help the child to feel less out of control and more empowered in their environments and within themselves. Aaron Heffernan, a therapist at Jewish Family Services who has worked in schools and in the community with children who have been exposed to gun violence and homicide, emphasizes that “student activism is an excellent way to encourage agency and empowerment in youth.” Aaron elaborates that student activism can take place in many different forms. “From encouraging your child to report disturbing social media, to making signs, to participating in walk-outs, activism can ultimately be very therapeutic for youth.”

Parents can ask their children’s school administrators about their current safeguards in place to protect children’s safety. This can help parents themselves feel more informed about their child’s safety at school. Furthermore, being able to remind children of specific protocols at their school and adults that are there to keep them safe may help the child feel more secure within their learning environment. As the National Association of School Psychologists points out, parents and teachers should actively reassure children that schools are still very safe and that there are adults at school who are continuously working to make their school a safe place.