



How to Talk to Kids about the Texas School Shooting

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Featuring Kathy Rivera, Executive Director/CEO, North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center

“Am I safe?”

That may be the first reaction of school-aged children when they hear about Tuesday’s mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Texas that left 21 people dead. “Most children want to know, ‘Am I going to be OK? Are you going to be OK? Is this going to happen to me?’,” said Mary Pulido, executive director of the Manhattan-based New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Long Island social workers and psychologists offered advice for parents:

See what your child knows. Ask if they’ve heard any news that they want to talk about, and if so, what they heard, advised Kathleen Rivera, executive director and CEO of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, with offices in Roslyn, Manhasset and Westbury. “Let the child use their own words to tell their own story. Sometimes you need to know what you’re working with before you can take proper action,” she said. Correct misinformation and talk to them in ways appropriate for their age.

If you think they haven’t heard about the shooting, you may wonder whether you should bring it up. While you know your child better than anyone, experts generally suggest introducing the topic. With cellphones and TV ubiquitous, chances are if they don’t hear about it from you, they will hear about it from someone else when you aren’t there to help them manage their reaction, Rivera said. You don’t need to be detailed, experts said. Kids understand the concept of good and evil.

Emphasize that many people work every day to keep them safe. Tell them, “Days, months, and years have gone by when you are OK and adults have protected you,” said Don Sinkfield, vice president of The New Hope Mental Health Counseling Services in Valley Stream. Outline in concrete terms that it’s your job to protect them, and that many people — from the President of the United States to their local police department to their individual teachers — are protecting them as well, experts said. “You can’t promise them something that is false — ‘it will never happen again,’” Rivera said. But remind them that their school has plans for how to keep them safe; you could review those plans, but don’t contradict the school’s protocol, experts said.

Don’t have the conversation at night. A lot of parents connect with their children at bedtime. That may not be the best time to broach the topic, said Laurie Zelinger, a child psychologist in private practice in Cedarhurst who spent 19 years as an elementary school psychologist in the Oceanside School District. “If you have a child who is particularly anxious or sensitive, have the conversation early in the day,” she advised. Give them a chance to absorb the information and ask questions.

Keep children away from constant news. “Please turn off the TV, stop the social media apps,” Rivera said. “Stay present with your child.”

Be conscious of your own reaction and how you are expressing it. “It can have a trickle-down effect,” Rivera said. This shooting happened on the heels of the mass shooting in a supermarket in Buffalo, so adults are feeling vulnerable as well. “We didn’t have a chance to recalibrate,” she said.

If your child is afraid to go to school and really needs a day to stay home for a day, that may be OK. “Right after a tragic event, kids can have acute stress. You want to be able to help kids resurrect a feeling of safety, and they will feel safer at home,” said Zelinger, who is also the author of the children’s book, “Please Explain Anxiety to Me” (Loving Healing Press, 2014).

This is not a “one and done” conversation. “As a parent, you have to do a temperature check on your child,” Rivera said. They might be OK today, but not tomorrow. Parents should look to community resources, she said. “We are a phone call away.”