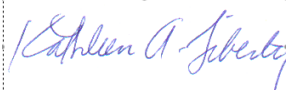


How to Support Child and Adolescent Learning and Coping in the Immediate Aftermath of the Shooting: Suggestions for Parents and Teachers

Kathleen Liberty, Ph.D
University of Canterbury

With support from:
Sue Bagshaw, Alison Hill, Anne Horton, Brie Liberty & Kirsty Robinson

The idea for this booklet came about from dismay at comments and trolling following the sad events of Friday 15 March in Christchurch, as well as my commitment to the importance of using research evidence to advise teachers and parents. In my investigations, I found that many websites giving advice to parents and teachers suggested strategies that turned out not to be supported by recent research. Therefore, with the help and advice of my support team, I have written this booklet from an psycho-social-educational perspective, based on published research literature cited at the end of this document. Please feel free to share. Kia Kaha, New Zealand.



These suggestions are not intended to supplant individual or group therapy or counselling for bereaved children, adolescents and families. Children and adolescents should be referred for professional services according to mental health guidelines.

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How to Talk with Children and Adolescents About The Shooting

Research says that you may hear children/adolescents voice these themes

- feeling vulnerable and unsafe,
- concern for the impact on others,
- concern for the impact on the community,
- distressing media coverage,
- proximity to the events and people involved in the events (police, emergency personnel, doctors, nurses),
- changes in psychosocial adjustment (such as having nightmares, not being able to sleep, being afraid of being alone, being afraid of strangers), and
- returning to daily life (when will things get back to normal?).

Our community will be adapting to major change, which often involves many secondary losses alongside all the natural reactions of horror and grief that follow a shooting like this. .

Important tips for discussing media or events or fears that the child/adolescent brings up

- Model confidence in the security and safety of the present context. Maintain a calm routine.
- Condemn violence in any context or situation
- Positively identify or praise (e.g., “that’s a great way to think of things”) positive coping statements, examples below
 - young child
 - “I can hold my teacher’s hand when I’m scared.”
 - I can hold my teddy when I’m scared.
 - I can take a flower to my mum to show her love.
 - I can hold the hand of a child who is crying.
 - I can smile and talk to the new child in class.
 - I can be calm.
 - I can draw a picture.
 - We can sing a song together.
 - We can play nicely together.
 - We can share our food with each other.
 - School child
 - “I can talk to my parents /teacher when I feel scared.”
 - I can turn off the TV.
 - I can read a story.
 - I can focus on my homework.
 - I can play with my friends.
 - I can join in Kapa Haka.
 - I can play sport.
 - I can help my mum with setting the table.
 - We can help our neighbours.
 - We can tell other kids to be nice.
 - Adolescent:
 - “I can call a helpline when I am scared.”

- I can speak up if I see bullying.
 - I can sit by someone new at lunch.
 - I can call-out trolls on social media.
 - I could try to go to bed earlier!
 - I could try to spend less time on social media and do something for others instead.
 - I can help my little brother with his homework.
 - I can put the wash in to help my mum when she is tired.
 - We can plan a positive assembly.
 - We can learn about and discuss inclusion and social justice.
 - We can study the importance of tolerance and diversity, just like we can study climate change.
 - We can donate our time to a community group.
 - We can collect money to help others.
 - We can point out rumours and gossip.
- Help challenge or problem-solve dysfunctional statements or situations (“What can you do when someone wants to show you something like a picture you don’t want to see?”).
 - Correct any misattributions associated with the event (e.g., “why does everyone hate us?”).
 - Explain how the news might accidentally distort the event by exaggerating and repeating the most negative aspects of the situation (e.g., the time constraints on news reports, the need for repeating the same information over and over on the news (because people are tuning in and out all the time), and the dramatic nature of news (need to get attention and advertising).
 - Introduce positive and hopeful aspects of the situation, which may not be on the news, or prominently on the news (e.g., police safely arrested the man, this shows that the rule of law and order will prevail, people brought flowers, comforted people, doctors and nurses worked through the night, the Prime Minister spoke to the nation and to the leaders of the world, she and the leader of the opposition came to Christchurch, an interpreter for people who are deaf helped communication, the police are protecting people in the hospital and other people at mosques, etc.).
 - Point out their personal safety at the present time.
 - Point out protections available to them in their schools and homes.
 - Describe to the child/adolescent that you yourself have sometimes felt afraid (in the past) but then you found a way to cope (e.g., “I turned off the tv and my phone, I drank some water and made a list of the good things happening in Christchurch, and the good things in my life like my friends and went to bed early”).

Parents and teachers can help children re-establish a sense of safety and predictability

Children, adolescents and communities commonly experience a deep sense of loss and uncertainty after a community shooting. Loss and uncertainty is not only about the loss of those killed and uncertainty about those who were injured, but also about the impacts on

those involved, from police, to emergency personnel, to doctors, nurses and all of their families. It may also be about a perceived loss of the sense of our country, as the Prime Minister said, “This is not who we are.” In Christchurch, this may have included a tenuous feeling of hope following on from the earthquakes, floods and Port Hills fire. And uncertainty about when their life might be better. “Loss is, therefore, intertwined with a sense of unpredictability.”

To counteract this, parents and teachers can help children re-develop a sense of control and predictability. For instance, parents and teachers can give children choices, respect their decisions, and help them achieve their own goals, thereby increasing the children’s agency and confidence. Parents and teachers can also support feelings of security and safety by sticking to routines for children’s daily activities and schedules. By gaining control and predictability, children will be less likely to perceive threat in the environment caused by unpredictable events like a shooting, and feel safer.

Conversations That Might Unintentionally Make Things Worse

Here are some common talking points that should be avoided or redirected.

Do not focus on the shooter or “bad man.”

This is because:

- Focusing on the shooter or “bad man” increases fear and threat perception.
- Focusing on the “bad man” leads children to talk about bad people and bad things that happen. This may increase the negative cognitions, cognitive-distortions, hyperarousal, hyper-vigilance and fear-related problems such as nightmares and difficulty concentrating.
- As the Prime Minister has said: We are an inclusive country.
- We want to keep it that way. Excluding, name-calling, demonising the shooter can have unintended effects that will be counter productive to our social cohesion in the future. For example, it could result in bullying or harrassment of people who have different views.
- There is an assumption that shooters have mental health problems, but this assumption is because we can’t otherwise understand how someone could take such action. “Although some mass shooters are found to have a history of psychiatric illness, no reliable research has suggested that a majority of perpetrators are primarily influenced by serious mental illness as opposed to, for example, psychological turmoil flowing from other sources” (Knoll & Annas, 2016, 81).
- However, assuming a mental health problem may also exacerbate oft-unspoken anxieties about mental health problems, and this can further stigmatize and exclude people with mental health problems. And it may stop people who need help from seeking it.

What to say if the child brings up the “bad man” or “shooter”

Try using a community-centred social justice approach. Everyone (children, adolescents, adults) cares about fairness and justice, and wants to do the right thing. This might include

saying something along the lines of “Sometimes people feel that life is unfair to them” (*n.b.*, this is a common feeling among school shooters in USA research, and is implied in the shooter’s document). “This person chose violence to express their feelings. Violence is always wrong (we don’t really understand why this person chose such violence).”

And then focus on (1) What are the needs of our family/classroom/school/community?
(2) How can we help?

And, as needed, “Our police arrested the shooter. Our justice system will deal with this person in a fair way. We live in a fair society.” If there is dispute about fairness, ask “What can we do to make it more fair/better?”

Do not say “everything will be ok” or focus on “resilience”. Do not offer advice on how to recover.

Attempting to support someone by offering advice and encouraging “recovery” are more likely to be unhelpful and people feel let down by this form of “social support”, as reported by survivors and those affected by grief/violence in published research studies. This is because their worries and fears are not being listened to and/or they understand that such reassurances are not reliable. Don’t say “everything will be ok” because no one can foresee the future, so this is a false promise, and can be perceived as such by children, who often ask a follow-up question such as, “How can you know?”

Do not avoid conversations about the event.

Although parents and teachers may want to protect children from information on the events, this is almost impossible to achieve. It is more realistic for parents and teachers to accept that news coverage, social media coverage, and conversations about the shooting will have been experienced by children and adolescents.

Do not pretend that such events do not affect parents and teachers.

Although it may seem natural for parents/teachers to want to reassure children and adolescents by pretending that distressing events do not emotionally affect them, it is far more helpful for parents/teachers to talk about their own feelings and thoughts, and about positive coping strategies that they have learnt to use, whilst remaining calm (modelling).

Do not prevent children from talking about what they have heard/seen from family, peers, media, etc.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which New Zealand is a signatory, states that a child “should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community” (The United Nations 1989: 1). In dealing with any topic related to child protection, it is essential to remain child-centred and include the child’s perspectives and experiences. As shown by the #ClimateStrike protest, the Student Army and many other events, many children want to be at the heart of their community – and are the future of their-our- community.

Instead, the most helpful course of action is let children take the lead in asking questions, as explained in a previous section.

Do not start out explaining or talking or lecturing. Do not ask probing questions (as suggested in some media postings).

This is because, the information given in such a context may not be understood correctly by the child, it may not actually be relevant to what they are thinking, they may not be ready for it, it may not be at their developmental or emotional level.

Instead, wait for the child to volunteer a question or a thought, idea or fear.

Use their initiated comments and questions to help the child understand what they have perceived as being most important, in language they can understand but in as accurate a way as you can.

Some Ways the Shooting and the Earthquakes are Different

Shooting	Earthquake
Human-generated disaster	Natural disaster
Multiple events on one day	10,000+ events over six years
Interpersonal violence	No interpersonal violence
Some people directly experienced-worshippers at mosques & whanau; police, emergency responders, doctors, nurses, medical personnel & whanau.	All people directly experienced, symptoms response to body being physically shaken by a force underground that was invisible to the naked eye.
More people- indirectly experienced via lockdowns, conversations, media.	

Because of the heavy association of symptoms with media and media saturation, and because of development differences in understanding, according to the research adolescents will be more affected than younger children (opposite to the earthquakes).

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