



The Dougy Center  
*The National Center for Grieving Children & Families*

## **The Senseless Shootings: How to Talk with Your Children**

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We're still reeling in Portland, Oregon, from the mall shooting which happened just three days ago. A normal December afternoon ended with thousands of terrified shoppers and mall workers fleeing or hiding as a masked 22-year-old gunman randomly fired near the mall's food court. Cindy Ann Yuille, 54, a hospice nurse, daughter, wife, and mother of two was shot in the back and killed. Steven Mathew Forsyth, 45, a businessman, son, husband, and father of two was shot in the head and killed. After wounding a 15-year-old girl, the gunman killed himself.

This morning the news reports stunned our nation again: unthinkable violence in an elementary school in Newton, Connecticut. Innocent children, little kids, gunned down in their classroom, along with teachers and school staff.

What do we tell our children? How do we reassure them of their own safety?

At The Dougy Center, we've provided grief support groups for children, teens, young adults and their parents or adult caregivers for 30 years. In 1988 we started our first "Healing After a Violent Death or Murder" group, and sadly, have seen the numbers of children and youth impacted by violent death grow over these decades. Our staff responded after the Thurston High school murders, following 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing, and to countless local and national man-made tragedies where children died, witnessed murders, or lost their own family members to violence.

Here are some things for adults to keep in mind:

### **Don't project your fears onto your children.**

You can't hear the news about children being murdered without thinking about how you'd feel if they were your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors. The outpouring of care and empathy for the families who lost loved ones--children and adults alike--will be powerful, and...we all know it could have been our mall, our child's school, our family members who died. Identifying with the senselessness and randomness makes us all feel more vulnerable. But we should remember that children don't always see things the same way that adults do, and it won't be helpful for them for us to fall apart. They need to see that we care, that we feel terrible about this tragedy, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. They will take their cues from our behavior.

**Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the tragedy over and over.**

Over-exposure to the graphic and emotional news can be overwhelming for children. Some children who repeatedly watched the footage of planes crashing into the towers on 9/11 thought it was happening again and again. Too much exposure can fuel their fear, so don't let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.

**Understand that you can't completely shield them from what happened.**

It would be next to impossible to hide this event from children, as much as we wish we could. ABC News health and medical writer, Dr. Richard Besser, in a blog the afternoon of the shootings in Connecticut, gave this advice in regards to children younger than 7: "Shield them from this. They don't need to know about it." ("Connecticut Shooting: What to Tell Your Kids")

I don't believe Dr. Besser understands the power of social media, even with young children. You might be able to shield your own child in your home, for example, by not turning on (or owning) a television, but you can't protect your children from hearing about it from other kids. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don't "need" to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.

**Model truth-telling and build trust with your children by letting them hear things, even hard things, from you directly.**

Eight days after the 9/11 attacks, I was meeting in small groups with pre-school workers in New York City, talking about how to respond to the young children in their care about the events. A man asked to speak to me privately after one of the trainings, and asked for my advice around his 7-year-old daughter. For the last week, since September 12th, she had been having stomachaches and difficulty sleeping. He said it was not tied to the events of 9/11 because "we don't have a television." As his story unfolded it was evident that he did not want to have to explain to his child why people would do such horrible things, a normal dilemma that we face as parents and adults. This child was experiencing physical reactions, as it turned out, not primarily because of her reaction to the events of 9/11, but because she was unable to share her fears and concerns and questions in her own home, faced with her parents' denial.

Here are some principles to keep in mind as you talk with children:

**There is no one typical reaction one can or should expect from children.**

Their responses will vary all over the map, from seeming disinterest to nightmares, eating issues and panic attacks. How any specific child will respond will depend on their age, previous experience with death and loss, their personality style. (Fearful children will tend to worry; quiet children may keep their feelings to themselves; those who want to appear unfazed may evidence a sense of bravado or lack of caring). Of course, children directly affected - those who had a family member die; those who witnessed the carnage; those who had friends die - will tend to have longer-term reactions and needs. Watch for changes in behavior, or concerning trends. While it would be normal to have heightened anxiety and sleeplessness, any concerning behavior or troubling symptoms should be taken seriously, and if warranted, professional help sought.

**Many children will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.**

Understandably. So will many adults. After the mall shootings on December 11, the news outlets were filled with people who said they'd never take their children to Clackamas Town Center again. Others said they'd return as soon as it opened in order to support the stores and employees who had experienced the traumatic events, and whose livelihoods were going to suffer as a result of the several day closure. While we can't guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Of course, the parents of the children at Sandy Hook Elementary School could never have imagined or foreseen the day that unfolded for their children. What makes these murders even more terrifying is that it highlights not only that it can happen anywhere, but that it did happen in two pretty normal, ordinarily safe towns on the opposite edges of our country: Clackamas, Oregon and Newton, Connecticut.

So, how do we reassure our children?

We can't promise that nothing bad will ever happen. What we can do is let them know that what happened, as horrible as it was, doesn't happen very often. The person who committed the crimes died, and is no longer able to hurt anyone else. One person's bad actions don't mean that everyone will do bad things.

**Children want, need, and deserve the truth.**

In 30 years of providing grief support to thousands of children and teens at The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families, we have never heard a child say, "I'm glad I was lied to." Many, however, struggle with anger and lack of trust toward parents or other adults who lied to them. When we don't tell the truth, they learn that we cannot be trusted. As difficult as it can be at times, and as horrendous as the truth may be, children want, need, and deserve the truth.

Clackamas Town Center re-opened three days after the murders of Cindy Ann Yuille and Steven Mathew Forsyth. Around that same time a gunman entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and ruthlessly gunned down 27 innocent children and adults. As we cope with trying to come to terms with the horror and terror of these murders, how to explain such things to our children and keep them safe, let us not forget the families and friends of those killed. They have long, difficult and lonely journeys ahead. Their lives truly will never be the same. They need our support, not just in these initial days of shock and disbelief, but long-term, long after the funerals are over, the tuna casseroles consumed, and the rest of the world has moved on.