

Praying with children after tragedy

Children often have a very good sense of where God is in a situation.

A recent post on Facebook told the story of a child who had said he was a bomb in heaven. When questioned it became clear he was a bomb of love so that when people upset God he could explode and make love go everywhere.

Teach children that prayer is a conversation. Sometimes we use formal words but it is fine just to talk to God and say what is on our mind. This might include anger, confusion and sadness.

Teach children to listen to God as well as talk. Introduce short period of listening into prayer time. See if they want to share what that meant to them.

Use art activities, writing and outside time as opportunities for exploring different ways to pray..

If you teach a good range of prayer tools your older children and teens will have resources to use. Remember this is the time when they need to integrate their faith into their developing view of themselves and the world. Value their own conversation with God, even if it does not sound like yours.

be BOLD!
Christ Episcopal Church

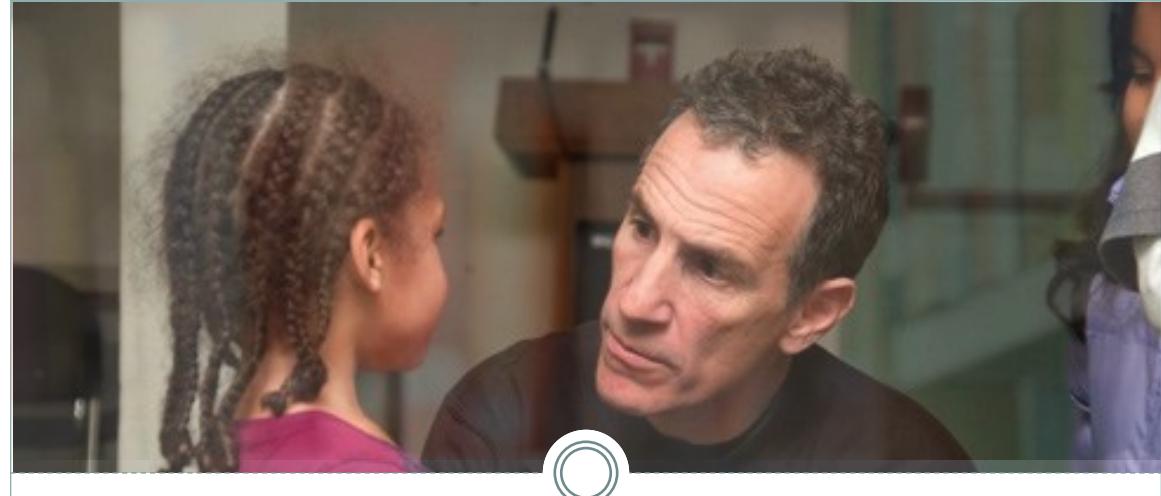
Other useful resources

This is only a brief guide. If your child is causing you concern please contact your doctor or other medical professional.

Your emotional health and spiritual life are vital in helping children to learn to deal with difficulty. Educational and spiritual resources are available through the Church and beyond. Clergy are always happy to talk through this with you.

This is a great resource from the Diocese of North Carolina
<http://www.dionc.org/resources-for-responding-to-tragedies.html>

Christ Episcopal Church
400 San Juan Drive,
Ponte Vedra Beach Fl 32082
2002 San Pablo Road,
Jacksonville Fl 32224
904 285 6127



Talking with children about violence and tragedy.

When something happens in the world which is shocking and terrible we go through all sorts of emotions. We are shocked and angry. We may feel helpless or feel the need to help. If we have children we need to also tend to their needs and answer their questions and this is a hard thing to do.

At what age do we deal with various aspects of disaster? How do we deal with their fears? Which questions should we save for later?

In this information age it is unlikely that we will be able to shield all but the youngest children from big new stories. Children talk at school, they overhear adults and older siblings. As they get older they have internet access of their own. Simply telling children not to worry, nothing will happen, does not make sense in a world where schools run "lock down" drills three or four times a year.

Some more specific suggestions follow but there are two really important guidelines here. Firstly, try to remain a non-anxious presence and, secondly, let your child guide the initial conversation so that you can gauge where they are on an issue.



Dealing with Fear

The first fear which we need to deal with is our own. If we are overwrought we cannot hope to be available to those around us. It is alright for parents to be upset, children need to learn what a mature response to extreme emotion looks like.

Stop. Breathe. Pray. (God be with me now)

Do your children know what has happened? Do they need to know? Are they likely to find out soon and will they want to have heard it from you? What do you know about the incident? What is not known yet?

Assuming everyone is safe in your household, reassure them. You can say you don't know or have not figured things out yet. But tell them you are working on it. If you are really upset, now is a great time for extra screen time (not the news!), or something which gives you a chance to clear your head.

Unloading emotion onto children by telling them to be quiet or go away is confusing to them. If you are ready to talk be attentive and present, no TV or cell phone.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Start by listening. You know your child. You are the expert here.

Young children may hear about things but will likely not understand them. They will register emotion and understand that those around them are angry or afraid. Stick to basic facts.

"Something bad happened. Lots of people were hurt. We are fine." For many children this will be enough. For others you will get some follow up questions. Again, answer simply. Try not to be angry in your answers, remember children of this age are learning as much from how you say something or how you act as from verbal processing. If you do not know a simple answer like,

"Sometimes there are things which I don't understand. Even grown up have things to learn."

As children mature through elementary school their understanding changes. Children in these years may have advanced linguistic and verbal skills but they will not, usually, have mastered abstract thinking.

Their world is one of opposites. People are good or bad. Answers are right or wrong. This can be the most challenging age group to talk to. They will often appear engaged in a conversation and then suddenly cut away or change the subject because they have the information which they were seeking.

Again, listen first. Explore what your child is actually saying, the words they use might be borrowed from someone else.

Ask questions like;

"What do you mean by that?" "What do you think?" "Does that bother you?"

Whatever they ask, remain as non-anxious as you can. Non-anxious does not mean you do not have feelings but that you have them under control enough that you are not putting your anger and fear onto your child in the way you are responding to their difficult questions.

Remember, to most children a question is just a question and they will not predict the impact it will have on you.

Tweens and teens are moving towards independence and developing the ability for abstract thought. They often develop strong opinions as they learn where they will fit into the world. It is also important to remember that their emotional and intellectual maturity may seem out of sync. Young people do not mature emotionally until some time in their twenties.

Again, listen first and be prepared to be non-reactive to opinions which differ to your own. Make sure you are distinguishing between fact and opinion when you speak, and check your facts. It helps teens to see that significant adults have thought through issues and have well considered opinions.

Whilst they will often shy away from being told things are alright or that you love them they still need to hear it. They are watching closely to see how you handle your own emotions. If you handle something badly, apologize. They will hear you even if they only say,

"Whatever," in response.