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Ten Ways to Support Kids After a School Shooting

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1. Attend to Basic Needs, Routine, and Play

Stick with your usual routines, even when it feels hard to do so. Routines help kids feel a sense of stability and control, which can support emotional regulation. Focus on the basics: rest, regular meals, hydration, and familiar bedtime routines.

It's also important to make room for play and movement. Kids often express their feelings through play, even when they don't have the words to explain what they're experiencing. Head to the playground, visit a track, or find another activity they enjoy. If your child isn't particularly active, try taking a short walk outside and noticing the trees, flowers, or other things around you. Focusing on the present moment can help with emotional regulation.

Some kids have extra energy or feel restless after a traumatic event. Play and physical activity can give them a helpful way to move their bodies and release some of that energy.

2. Reassure Them About Safety

Make time to talk about safety. Remind kids that parents, teachers, school staff, neighbors, and other trusted adults are working hard to keep them safe.

Avoid promising that something bad will never happen. We can't guarantee that, and kids may have a hard time trusting those promises when something scary has already happened. Instead, talk about the safety measures that are in place and that they can see, such as locked doors and school safety personnel.

You might also consider letting your child bring a comforting item to school, if permitted, such as a favorite stuffed animal or another special object that helps them feel secure.

3. Be Simple, Clear, and Brief

Take a breath and slow down so you can respond calmly and clearly. Avoid volunteering graphic information, and answer questions honestly, using simple, age-appropriate language. Younger kids may focus on concrete or specific details that surprise or upset adults. They might ask what happened to people who were hurt or died or focus on particular images or details. These questions can be difficult to hear, but they're one-way young children try to understand something frightening.

It's okay to answer the questions they ask without adding details they haven't requested. You don't need to explain everything at once.

Also, limit exposure to news coverage and social media, where images and details can be graphic and disturbing. When possible, supervise online activity and keep kids away from videos that may appear in their feeds or recommendations. If you've been searching for information yourself, you may notice more related content appearing in your recommendations, too.

4. Listen and Let Them Lead

Let kids decide when and whether they're ready to talk. Don't pressure them to share details or repeatedly revisit what happened. Talking can be helpful for some children, but it isn't the only way to process a traumatic experience, and not every child will want to talk about it right away.

Instead, stay present and engaged in whatever they want to share or do. Follow their lead, answer their questions, and remind them that you're there for them. Your steady presence communicates that they don't have to navigate this alone.

5. Share Adult Worries in Adult Spaces

Pay attention to what you're saying and who might be listening. Make time to talk with other adults about your worries, fears, and questions out of earshot of the kids around you.

It makes sense that you want information. As adults, gathering information can help us make sense of what has happened and help us feel more prepared. But constant news coverage, videos, and adult conversations can also leave kids feeling overwhelmed or more afraid.

When possible, save those conversations and news updates for times when kids are asleep or occupied elsewhere. You deserve space to process what's happening, too—just try to make sure you have that space away from little ears.

6. Don't Minimize What Happened

Avoid saying things like "It's not a big deal" or "There's nothing to worry about." When something frightening has happened, downplaying it can feel confusing to kids. They often pick up on the emotions around them and recognize when something serious has occurred.

Instead, acknowledge what happened and validate their feelings. You might say, "That was really scary. It makes sense that you're having big feelings, and it's okay to feel them."

You don't have to make their feelings go away. Sometimes, simply letting kids know that their reactions make sense is the most helpful thing you can do.

7. Take Care of Yourself, Too

Remember that you need support, too. Find ways to process your own stress and fears so you can be as calm and steady as possible for the kids around you.

And give yourself some grace: You don't have to be a superhero. Be present with your kids, pay attention to what they need, and then take a beat to attend to your own needs. That back-and-forth matters. It's hard to support someone else when you're running on empty.

Stay hydrated, eat regularly, rest when you can, and spend time with people who support you. Remember, your kids don't need you to have all the answers. They need you to be there with them.

8. Don't Punish Normal Reactions to Stress and Trauma

After a frightening event, kids may become irritable, angry, clingy, or more emotional than usual. They may have trouble sleeping, sleep more than usual, complain of stomachaches or headaches, or become more sensitive to loud noises, yelling, or other reminders of what happened. These reactions can be ways their bodies and minds respond to stress. Sometimes, kids express their distress through behavior before they can explain what they're feeling.

As hard as it can be in the moment, try to respond with patience and curiosity rather than with punishment. Maintain appropriate boundaries but remember that a child who is struggling may need connection and reassurance more than consequences. Offer extra affection, hugs (if they want them), high-fives, and time together.

If reactions are severe, persist, or interfere with daily life, consider reaching out to a pediatrician or mental health professional for additional support.

9. Ask What They Need

Don't assume kids can't tell you what they need just because they're young. They may have great ideas about what would help them feel better or more secure.

Try asking, "What would help you feel a little better right now?" or "Is there anything that would help you feel safer at school?"

You may not always be able to make their ideas happen, and that's okay. Listen, ask what feels helpful about their ideas, and explore what might be possible together. Even when you can't give them exactly what they want, taking their ideas seriously shows them that their feelings matter and that you're there to support them.

10. Above All Else, Trust Yourself

You know your child better than anyone else. Hopefully, these ideas and reminders are helpful, but trust that you can support your child through this.

You are an important source of comfort and security for them, and being present matters. Don't put pressure on yourself to say the exact right thing. That's an impossible expectation for any of us. Instead, focus on showing up, listening, and responding with love and care. You can figure out the words together as you go.

And if you're reading this list, you're already thinking about how to best support your child. That care and intention matter more than you may realize.