



Talking with children about violence

Talking with children about violence can be hard, but it's often the best way to help. Adults avoid talking to children about violence for many reasons. Have you thought any of the things below? If you have, you aren't alone:

- "I don't know what to say."
- "I've tried to talk about it, but my child won't listen."
- "I feel uncomfortable."
- "I'm scared to bring it up."
- "I'm embarrassed."
- "It might make things worse."
- "It's not a big deal."
- "It's over now."
- "Why talk about it?"

It's OK to have these thoughts, but don't let them stop you from talking to a child who may have seen or been hurt by violence. Talking is the first step toward healing. Sure, you may not know exactly what to say. You may feel uncomfortable, but you can do your best. Here are some ways to get started:

- Take a deep breath. Talking about violence is tough.
- Try to get more comfortable by talking to someone you trust first. That person can help you plan what you want to say to the child.
- If you were hurt by the same violence the child saw or experienced, tell yourself that it's OK to feel upset when you remember what happened. It's scary for the child, too. Once you start talking, you may feel better.
- Begin with an opening question, asking the child what he or she thinks happened and how he or she feels about it.
- Don't assume you know what the child experienced, even if you were there when the violence happened. Children often perceive violence very differently than grownups do. Don't try to correct the child. Listen.
- Be patient. Don't push it if it seems as if the child doesn't want to talk or listen. You can try again later.

Sometimes, a child needs more help than you can give.

Children may be so upset by what has happened or what they have seen that nothing you can do will help. In those situations, you should find a trained professional. A psychologist, social worker, or school counselor can help the child talk about what happened. The professional can also help you find the actions or words to help very young children who are not able to talk about their experiences.

Seeing a mental health professional is a good idea when a child does one or more of the following for longer than one month:

- Has frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Withdraws and doesn't want to play with other children
- Has angry outbursts
- Has nausea, headaches, or other physical illnesses
- Loses or gains weight
- Has problems at school
- Feels intensely anxious
- Avoids people, places, or things that remind him or her of the event
- Seems depressed or hopeless
- Gets involved with alcohol and other drugs
- Gets in trouble with the law or takes dangerous risks
- Constantly worries about what happened

Getting professional help will keep the child's problems and worries from getting worse—although the symptoms may not disappear immediately. If you believe a child needs professional help, talk to a trusted adult, such as the child's pediatrician, teacher, school counselor, spiritual leader, or coach, about finding an appropriate mental health professional.

For a variety of reasons, many people are reluctant to seek help for mental health problems. However, not getting professional help for a child who needs it could hamper the child's normal growth and development. Protecting the child's mental health is as important as caring for his or her physical health. Getting help early can help the child cope better and prevent additional problems.

Hotlines

When you call one of the hotlines listed here, you'll talk to a trained counselor who will connect you to the help you need. Also, contact the employee assistance program (EAP) for more resources and to see what additional benefits you may be entitled to.

VictimConnect (National Center for Victims of Crime Help Line)

1-855-4VICTIM (1-855-484-2846)

<https://victimconnect.org>

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233)

1-800-787-3224 TTY

Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year

<https://www.thehotline.org>

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year

<https://www.childhelp.org>

Source(s)

¹ U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs (OJP), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). (n.d.). *Healing the invisible wounds: Children's exposure to violence* (pp. 7–9, 23). Retrieved August 22, 2019, from <https://www.ojjdp.gov>

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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