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Doctor Advises Adults on How to Talk with Children about Connecticut School Shooting

As the nation watches the reports about the recent Connecticut school shooting, many people may find themselves feeling anxious, worried, saddened or otherwise concerned.

While adults may know how to express these feelings, often they do not know how to talk with children about the way the children are feeling.

David Schonfeld, MD, Director, National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center provides the following tips to help adults talk with children about the shooting.

- Talk about the event with your child. Silence isn't comforting in crisis situations and suggests that what has occurred is too horrible to even speak of. After a major crisis, even very young children have likely already heard what has happened—but they may not understand what it means.
- Start by asking what your child what he or she has already heard about the events and what questions or concerns they have. Listen for misinformation, misconceptions and any underlying fears or concerns. If the child expresses worries, sadness or fears, tell them what adults are doing to keep them safe but don't provide false reassurance or dismiss their concerns. Help them identify strategies to cope with difficult feelings.
- Minimize your child's exposure to media (television, radio, print, internet, social media) and if they do watch, consider recording, screening and watching with them. Remember children often overhear or see what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio and may be exposed directly as the news evolves through the internet or social media. While children may seek and benefit from basic information about what happened so that they can understand what is happening in their world, they (and adults) don't benefit from graphic details or exposure to disturbing images or sounds. In the aftermath of a crisis is a good time to disconnect from all media and sit down together and talk as a family.
- Encourage your child to ask questions now and in the future, and answer the questions directly. Like adults, children are better able to cope with a crisis if they feel they understand it. Question-and-answer exchanges provide you with the opportunity to offer support as your child begins to understand the crisis and the response to it.
- Share your feelings about the shooting with your child and the strategies you have used to cope with your concerns, sadness, or other difficult feelings. If you feel overwhelmed and/or hopeless, look for some support from other adults before reaching out to your child.
- Reassure the child that feeling sad, worried or angry is okay. Let your child know that it is all right to be upset about something bad that happened. Use the conversation to take the opportunity to talk about other troubling feelings your child may have.
- Don't feel obligated to give a reason for what happened. Although adults often feel the need to provide a reason for why someone committed such a crime, many times they don't know. It is okay to tell your child that you don't know why at this time such a crime was committed.
- If you have concerns about your child's behavior, contact his or her pediatrician, other primary care provider, or a qualified mental health care specialist.

For information on how to help your children cope with crises or disasters, please visit the website for the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis.

About Cincinnati Children's

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center ranks third in the nation among all Honor Roll hospitals in U.S. News and World Report's 2012 Best Children's Hospitals ranking. It is ranked #1 for neonatology and in the top 10 for all pediatric specialties. Cincinnati Children's is one of the top two recipients of pediatric research grants from the National Institutes of Health, and a research and teaching affiliate of the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. The medical center is internationally recognized for improving child health and transforming delivery of care through fully integrated, globally recognized research, education and innovation. Additional information can be found at www.cincinnatichildrens.org.

