

Tough Talk:

Active Shooter – Talking to Your Kids in the Aftermath



If you are both a fire fighter and a parent, responding to the loss of life of a child can be an incredibly traumatic event. And while society has begun to explore the impact of post-traumatic stress on fire fighters, there is one population that receives less attention: the children of fire fighters.

Whether it's responding to a mass shooting, fatal fire or line-of-duty-death, even young children can understand the inherit danger of a fire fighter's job and the world in which they live. Likewise, if the sudden loss of life occurs, especially the life of a child, the impact can be felt through every layer of a community. When traumatic events capture the nation, children of fire fighters may not only fear for their own safety, but their parent's safety as well.

Talking to your kids about the loss of life is never easy, but here are some points to consider:

Consider the Age

In the aftermath of a mass shooting, the developmental stage of your child should guide your approach. For kids ages 0-5, it's likely they are unaware of the event and, thus, do not need a direct explanation. If you responded directly to the event or were injured, however, it may be appropriate to say to an older toddler, "Daddy/Mommy had a bad day at work, but I'm safe and happy to be home now." At this age, most children lack an understanding of death and value predictable routines above all else.

For kids ages 6-11, it may be helpful to inquire about what your child has already heard at school or believes about the incident. While avoiding the discussion altogether may feel more comfortable in the short term, not directly acknowledging a traumatic community event may produce more anxiety for your child at time when he/she needs stability and reassurance. It's appropriate to confirm broad facts



of what occurred while limiting exposure to media and discussion of unnecessary details or graphic content.

While teenagers may seem to have little reaction to a shooting initially, they certainly understand that death is real, inevitable and irreversible. As a primary adult in the life of your teen, you have a critical opportunity to model some important life lessons. Death is a part of life and sometimes bad things happen to good people for no reason. When death occurs earlier than it should, remind your teen that it is perfectly normal to be sad and angry and want answers to important questions. Be honest with your teen that you do not have all the answers, but you are here and ready to listen when he/she is ready to talk.

Offer Reassurance to Your Child

Regardless of what type of incident occurred, kids of all ages need to know they are physically safe and that their parents are safe. Kids need reassurance that the adults in their life — parents, teachers, fire fighters and police — are doing everything possible to keep their world safe. In chaotic or emotional times, it is critical that your child has consistency with mundane routines, such as pick-up and drop-off schedules and family meals. These rituals help convey a sense of normalcy to a child or teen and send the message, "Even though this tragedy occurred, I am still here for you and your world is not changing."

For fire fighters, convincing your children you are safe is a more complicated message. Don't offer false realities or promises that you cannot keep. Instead, acknowledge your children's fears and the inherit risks of your job, while offering assurance that fatal events (such as mass shootings) do happen, but are exceedingly rare. Educate your kids on the numerous precautions that are taken to ensure your safety on the job. When you are off duty and feel the time is right, consider taking your child to visit your firehouse to introduce them to some of the crew members and equipment that helps keep you safe.

Signs to Watch for in Kids

Just as adults, no child responds to grief or tragedy the same way. Your main responsibility as a parent is to convey unconditional love and support to your child, listen when they are ready to talk and continue taking care of yourself.

Despite your efforts and communication, some children will still have a tough time processing their grief, shock or trauma. If your child is displaying any of these signs, consult with your child's teacher, counselor or physician for help.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating much less/more• Sleeping much less/more• Urine or bowel accidents• Changes in hygiene• Persistent colds or stomach aches• Fatigue or sluggishness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Persistent crying• Irritability• Clinginess• Overactivity• Fear or anxiety• Guilt/shame• Acting aloof or distant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not wanting to talk about it• Withdrawal from family/friends• Withdrawal from hobbies/sports• Changes in grades• Aggression towards things or people

Acknowledge Your Own Reaction

Regardless of the type of adversity, kids will take a cue from their parents on how cope. Teach your kids it's okay to talking about feelings, ask for help and find healthy outlets to manage pain. For example, "Mom and Dad feel sad (or scared) too. We don't know why this happened, but we know we love you." By acknowledging your own feelings in response to a tragic event, you are modeling a crucial life skill that all kids need: emotional intelligence.

What is post-traumatic stress?

Responding to an active shooter event or community violence incident is not an everyday occurrence and can impact even the most seasoned fire fighter.

Post-traumatic stress is the experience of one or more symptoms listed here for any period of time following a traumatic event. At some point in their career, most fire fighters and paramedics will experience post-traumatic stress. Symptoms usually subside within a few days or weeks and do not significantly impair daily functioning. Post-traumatic stress is NOT recognized as a mental health disorder and often requires no treatment intervention. Symptoms are classified in the following categories:

Reliving the event (intrusion)

- Intrusive memories or thoughts
- Distressing dreams
- Dissociative reactions (flashbacks)
- Intense psychological or physical distress when exposed to related cues

Avoiding things that remind you of the event (avoidance)

- Avoidance of people, places and things that remind you of the event
- Avoidance of feelings or thoughts associated with the event

Negative emotions and thoughts (altered mood and cognition)

- Persistent exaggerated negative beliefs about self, others or the world
- Self-blame caused by distorted beliefs about the cause of the event sustained negative emotional state (horror, anger, guilt, etc.)
- Inability to experience positive emotions
- Difficulty recalling parts of the event
- Loss of interest in usual activity
- Feeling detached from others

Feeling on edge (arousal and reactivity)

- Irritability or verbal outburst to others or objects
- Reckless self-destructive behavior
- Hypervigilance (constantly scanning environment to detect threats)
- Exaggerated startled response
- Poor concentration
- Sleep disturbance

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic disorder occurs when an individual experiences symptoms in all four categories of post-traumatic stress (intrusion, avoidance, altered mood/cognition, and arousal/reactivity). Additionally, symptoms persist longer than one month AND cause significant daily impairment. PTSD is not a normal reaction to a traumatic event and is considered a mental health disorder that warrants treatment.