



How to talk to kids about school shootings: An age-by-age guide

Early elementary school

If your child is very young, and you're worried you can't avoid the topic of school shootings because of [active shooter drills](#) at school or a tragic event that hit particularly close to home, you'll want to keep it as simple as possible. Here are three tips for talking to early elementary school students about gun violence at school —

- **Simplify the narrative.** As adults, we know that gun violence is a very complicated topic — but young kids don't yet have the understanding of the world to help them put school shootings into context. They tend to think in black and white, so your narrative about school shootings should be a simple, [one-sentence story](#) that reinforces your values as a parent, and their sense of safety.

Here's what you can say: *"Someone made a bad choice to hurt people at school, but lots of brave people helped out and you are safe."*

- **Ask open-ended questions.** For younger kids, it's best to let them tell you what they already know and answer any questions they may have with simple, need-to-know facts. You don't need to give them any unnecessary information. Rather, use this [conversation](#) to assess their understanding of the situation and fill in any gaps that you think might reassure them.

Here's what you can say: *"What have you heard about it?" "What do you think is going on?"*

- **Reassure them.** Whether they're feeling nervous about an active shooter drill at school, or about a tragic event that they heard about, your job is to reassure them that they're safe at home and at school. Let them know that there are brave and helpful people working on the problem, and that any drills they have to participate in will only make them safer.

Here's what you can say: *"There are lots of helpers working together to solve this problem and keep you safe."*

Late elementary school

You can count on kids in this age group to ask lots of questions. It's also important to keep in mind that the feelings and images that come along with a school shooting tragedy will stick with these kids much longer than your words. This means it's important to do your best to shield them from the media circus and

speculation that often follows a school shooting. Here are three tips for talking to late elementary school students about gun violence in schools —

- **Leave space for their feelings.** You might see a wide range of reactions from kids in this age group, and not all of them will be comfortable. Leave space for them to express their feelings in whatever way is most helpful for them. You might ask them to draw a picture about it or take a walk around the block together to decompress.

Here's what you can say: *"I know you're having some big feelings about what we just talked about. Can you draw me a picture of how you're feeling right now?"*

- **Don't give too much info.** Kids this age are known for asking a million questions. If they ask you something about a school shooting that you feel would give them too much unnecessary (or scary) information, you can respond with your own open-ended questions and then reassure them that no one knows all the answers but they're safe with you.

Here's what you can say: *"What do YOU think?" "I don't know the answer to your question, but there are lots of people working together to protect you."*

- **Stick to their routine.** It might be tempting to keep kids home from school if they're feeling scared or nervous, but disruptions in their routine can actually make them worry that where they typically spend their day might be unsafe.

Here's what you can say: *"I hear that you're feeling scared about what's going on, and I want you to know that the safest place you can be during the day is at school. Everyone there is looking out for you."*

Middle school

These kids are big enough to understand more about the context of school shootings and gun violence in schools, but will still need reassurance and support to process their feelings. Here are some tips for talking with middle schoolers about school shootings —

- **Test their knowledge first.** Before you launch into any explanations or reassurance, you'll first want to find out what they already know and feel about the situation. Answer any questions they have with only the need-to-know facts and lots of reassurance that they're safe.

Here's what you can say: *"What have you heard about it? How did it make you feel? I don't know all the details, but I do know that someone made a bad choice to hurt people at school. I don't know why they made that choice, but I do know that lots of people work together to make sure you are safe at your school and at our home."*

- **Cut down on media exposure.** Kids this age are starting to be more exposed to social media and the news, which means that they will likely hear more information than what you tell them. [Misinformation](#) is often flying after tragic events like school shootings, so you'll want to correct any misinfo you hear

from your child, and cut down on their exposure to news and social media until the news cycle moves on.

Here's what you can say: *"I know you usually look at YouTube after dinner, but for the next few days we're going to try a different activity instead. What do you think our after-dinner activity should be this week?"*

High school

High schoolers are starting to hone their moral compass and develop unique political views. Teenagers will be much more likely to hear news of a school shooting before you can have a conversation with them, so it's important to check in about their mental health first. Then, you can work together to develop a plan of action. Here are a few tips for talking with high schoolers about school shootings —

- **Check on their mental health.** Teens are more aware than younger kids of the possibility of a school shooting happening in their own community. This means that these events can create a lot of anxiety and fear for kids in this age group. You can set the stage for a productive mental health check-in by sharing your own feelings, and leaving lots of space for their questions. If they seem overwhelmed, let them know you can come back to the conversation when they're ready.

Here's what you can say: *"I want us to take a few minutes to discuss what happened when you're ready. It's OK to feel sad or scared, or even nothing at all. I'm feeling really sad about the people who were hurt. How are you feeling about what happened?"*

- **Take action together.** A wonderful thing about this generation of kids is their drive to make positive change happen. In the wake of a school shooting, it can help teens feel less anxious to find solutions and work towards them. Volunteering for a nonprofit that promotes gun safety, working with an anti-bullying program at their school, or holding a fundraiser for shooting victims can give teens a semblance of control during a very scary time.

Here's what you can say: *"Let's make a list of all of the ways we could do our part to help out with this problem. Then, you can circle one or two where you think we, as a family, could have the most impact. Then we can put some dates on the calendar to do those things together."*

*<https://parents-together.org/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-school-shootings-an-age-by-age-guide/>