

How Not to Talk With Children About the Sandy Hook Shooting

By [KJ DELL'ANTONIA](#) (from NY Times, December 15)

“First, find out what they have heard.” That’s the first line of Benedict Carey’s article on [how to talk to your children](#) about the mass shooting that took place Friday at an elementary school in Connecticut. I received a similar e-mail from my own children’s school, encouraging parents consider our individual children and their needs as we try to find words. How to talk to our kids is paramount, but I found myself focused on a different side of the question: how not to.

Part of me wants to talk to my children. I want to tell them what happened, and then drill them wildly on how to protect themselves. I want to promise them that it could never happen here, and at the same time reassure myself.

“First, find out what they have heard” is advice that puts the focus where it needs to be: on the child, not on the parent. Many of us think our children will be thinking and worrying about what happened in Newtown because we can’t avoid thinking about it ourselves. But what if the answer is that they know very little? What if the child in front of you doesn’t appear worried at all? Do we have to “talk to our children” about every tragedy? As awash in information as adults are, many children, especially younger ones, simply aren’t in that position. It may be difficult, but also unnecessary, to protect them from hearing about a news event at all. And a child whose television comes from Disney and whose primary use of a mobile device involves throwing birds at pigs may not be inundated with information in the ways we fear.

“Most kids are pretty self-centered,” Nancy Rappaport, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of school-based programs for the Cambridge Health Alliance, said. “Some may be more vulnerable to these kinds of fears, but many may just say, ‘Oh, that’s too bad,’ and move on.” This is a reaction that’s hard to understand for an adult, but fine, Dr. Rappaport said, for children whose focus is still naturally on themselves.

So as a parent, you’re left with the question not just of how to talk to your child about tragedy, but of whether you’re talking to your child for your child — or for yourself. There’s the question of what to say, but also when, and if, you should say it. “If you’re feeling panicked, and like there’s no place safe in the world, then that’s a good time to step back and get those thoughts in order,” Dr. Rappaport suggested. “But if we try to wait until we’ve fully come to terms with something like this, then we’ll never be able to talk. In fact, we’d never be able to get out of bed in the morning.”

She brought up a strategy that’s commonly used for anxiety in children: “worried thought, brave thought.” “We teach kids to counter a worried thought with a brave thought,” she said, and to “know that although the worried thought may come back, the brave thoughts are always there as well.” A worried thought might be “A shooter will come to my children’s school and there is nothing I can do about it,” with the brave counter “School shootings are still rare, and countless people are working to make them rarer still.”

If you’re going to talk to your children, start with a brave thought, she said. If the worried thoughts return while you’re talking, acknowledge them — out loud, with your child. It’s all right to show that you, too, worry. But then bring a brave thought back again. If you sense anxiety in your child, you could

even share the same strategy. And remember that you don't have to get it right in one single talk. In fact, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that "talking to" your children isn't the goal. It's talking with your children that will matter in the long run.

More immediately, though, I keep coming back to the question of whether this a conversation that you have to have at all. Do you have to tell a small child what's happened, on the theory that her equally small classmates may be chattering about it on Monday, or might you just be creating an anxiety that never existed to begin with — making yours the child who begins the chattering? I don't know. My own children had a half day on Friday, and came home just as this news began to appear. Judicious management of the car radio and any newspapers means it really was up to me to decide whether and what to tell them before Monday. (They're 11, 8, 7 and 6, only watch children's networks on television and are completely uninterested in social media.)

Ultimately, I told them, fairly simply. We did talk about what you'd do, a little bit, if you wanted to get away from "someone bad." And then we left it. (I had a slightly more nuanced discussion with my oldest later, but because he seemed truly unconcerned, I let it go for now.) I suspect they won't be thinking about it at all when they go to school on Monday morning, and I hope that if their classmates bring it up, my kids will know enough to manage any fears.

But I'll be thinking about it, and so, if you're a parent, will you. I don't know how sending all of our children back to school this week can be done without those "worried thoughts" rushing in hard and fast. If one of my children asks, I'll admit it. I'll try to find a "brave thought" to back it up. And if (when) words fail me, I'll remember that a hug sometimes says the only reassuring thing there is to say.