

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'm scared to bring it up."

"It's not a big deal."

"I've tried to talk about it, but my child won't listen."

"I'm embarrassed."

"It's over now. Why talk about it?"

"It might make things worse."

"I feel uncomfortable."

It's okay 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 okay 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 they think happened and how they feel 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 adults.
- Don't try to correct the child. Listen. Be patient.

Sometimes, a child needs more help than you can give. 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 them of the event
- Seems depressed or hopeless
- Uses alcohol and/or drugs*
- Gets in trouble with the law or takes dangerous risks*
- Constantly worries about what happened

**You may want to seek professional help more quickly.*