

PFA Tips

Let's Talk About This Horrible Event on the News

We're watching civil unrest unfold before our eyes in the streets of Baltimore. It's all over the TV, radio, social media – and some are even witnessing it out their windows. So chances are your children are aware of events and have questions, concerns and worries. These tips are applicable to conversations you have with your children about natural disasters, city violence, and other tragedies.

Let them guide the conversation

Their fears may be specific, and you certainly don't want to add additional worries by presenting information that has not yet crossed their minds. Allow them to ask questions, and respond with clear, factual answers. Try to avoid abstract concepts as those may be difficult for kids with autism to understand.

Check for understanding

If you aren't sure that your child understands what you're telling him, it's ok to ask him to explain what you've said. You don't want to increase his anxiety by assuming you've given an adequate explanation, only for the reality to be that he is still filled with unanswered questions. And may even have more questions following your discussion, but is afraid to ask for clarification. Or, he may be misinterpreting the meaning of the words/terms you are using.

Keep the discussion age appropriate

As with all children, it is important to present information at their level of understanding.

Use your child's preferred communication method

This needs to be a two-way discussion. Provide your child with the tools she might need to ask questions and respond to what you are saying. Tools can include pictures, diagrams, maps, social stories, videos, or modeling.

Describe the emotions of the victims

Label the emotions people are exhibiting. If you see someone crying, identify they are sad, and the circumstance that is making them sad. It is a myth that people with autism don't feel empathy. They do. But many may express it in a manner that others are not expecting. In our training sessions, we use this example:

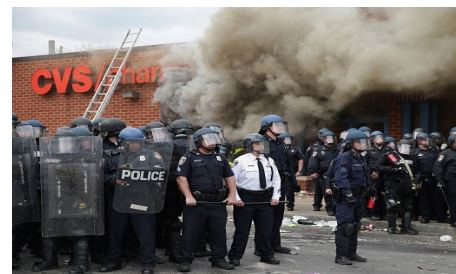
"Trish may tell me that her dog died, and I may start laughing. I'm not laughing because I'm happy that her dog died. I may be laughing because I'm experiencing an overwhelming sense of joy that MY dog did not die. So I feel badly for Trish, but I'm not expressing it in a way you would expect me to."

Acknowledge the death toll

If people have died, don't try to hide that fact, especially if your child has already heard. You can use this as an opportunity to explain what death is, and why people on TV are crying and grieving. Explaining death now, while it is on TV, may help prepare your child for when the time comes that you are dealing with death at a more personal level, such as the loss of a family member.

Let your child talk about it as long as he needs

Some children cope with stress by talking about a situation over and over, and maybe for a period longer than you think is necessary. But everyone processes tragedies differently. Something your child saw on TV, or saw online, may still be playing fresh in his



mind long after you yourself have moved on.

Realize the impact doesn't need to be personal

Many of us may feel removed from a situation that isn't happening to us, or is happening geographically at a distance. But our kids may be feeling the impact as intensely as if the tragedy was happening to them directly. Don't minimize their feelings if they are experiencing grief for someone else. That's empathy.

Don't pretend to be the forensic psychiatrist for this case (unless you are)

Sometimes people do terrible things we don't understand. It's ok to say that to your child rather than trying to speculate what caused someone, or a group, to commit a horrific act.

Look for the positives in the story

From every tragic situation, heroes emerge. Police, firefighters, EMS, community leaders, clergy, everyday citizens who stepped up.... The stories are there. Give your child the opportunity to BE one of those heroes. Your child can collect/donate items for the victims, help in the clean-up process, or

continued on back

Let's Talk About This Horrible Event – cont.



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send encouraging notes to victims or first responders. For more ideas, read PFA Tips: Giving Back at <http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/home/pfa-tips-giving-back/>.

Identify the “Good Guys”

It can be difficult for children to understand who the good guys are when they see images of police in full riot gear and masks throwing tear gas, or wrestling people to the ground. In these situations, the police may look scary. Explain that the uniforms are protecting them, and that their job is to protect the communities.

Reassure your child she is safe

Don't make unrealistic promises (what you see on TV can NEVER happen here; a superhero will protect you). Instead, tell her what measures are in place to help keep her safe. This might be a good opportunity to practice skills that relate to the event. For instance, if the event is a fire, you may want to have a fire drill to practice the steps for exiting the house safely.

Make an appointment with a therapist

If your child is having difficulty coping, or really can't seem to move past an incident, it may be time to schedule some time for

her to visit with a counselor who can talk with her and address coping strategies. Be aware that your child may not verbalize that she is upset, but it may present in other ways, such as not sleeping, a change in behavior or eating habits, displays of anger, or becoming withdrawn.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Death and Grieving

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/home/pfa-tips-death-and-grieving/>

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