

# DISCUSSING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

STUDENT  
SUPPORT  
DEPARTMENT

BY: [HTTPS://WWW.PTA.ORG/](https://www.pta.org/)



*Children are aware of what is happening in the world around them. Parents and educators cannot assume that children are unaffected by global events. When frightening or violent incidents occur, such as man-made or natural disasters, both children and adults may experience a range of emotions including fear, confusion, sadness and anger.*

To counteract fear and give reassurance, parents, teachers and day care providers can provide opportunities for children to express how they feel and channel their feelings into positive actions.

Discussions between adults and children in difficult situations can be an opening for reinforcing family and community values, beliefs and traditions.

To learn more, take a look at the following advice.

## Prepare

In order to provide the reassurance and guidance children need, adults should first come to terms with their own feelings. Explore and discuss with other adults your own feelings and perceptions. Recognize that your past experiences may influence how you look at current situations.

## Be Alert

Be alert to signs of upset in children. These signs may include withdrawal, lack of interest, acting out, fear of school or other activities, or anything that deviates from the child's norm.

## Listen

Listen carefully in order to learn what children know and are thinking. Treat all children's questions with respect and seriousness; do not "shush," ignore or dismiss children. Clarify children's questions so that you can understand what is being asked, what has led to the question and how much information a child wants. Sometimes, without repeating the exact words, it is helpful to reflect what you think a child is feeling, as a way of giving a child the opportunity to confirm that you have understood, or to clarify. For example, you can say: "It sounds as if you're afraid that something like this might happen again."

## Reassure

Review the facts of what actually happened. Reassure children in age-appropriate ways that they are safe. When talking to toddlers, responses can be simple and direct: “I love you and I will always do everything I can to make you safe.” Let children know that many people and organizations are working to make us safe, for example, police, rescue workers, and government and private agencies. Reassure children that while there are events that occur that are hard to understand, we live in a wonderful country and, for the vast majority of the time, we are safe.

## Be Honest

Answer questions as clearly and honestly as you can, using developmentally appropriate language and definitions. If you don't know the answer to a child's question, say so and make a plan to try to find out. Correct yourself if you give incomplete or inaccurate information. Don't be afraid of making a mistake; when we admit our mistakes, adults model for children how to admit their own mistakes. Be direct about acknowledging mistakes and avoid defensiveness; say, “I made a mistake.”

## Share Your Perceptions

Share your perceptions and feelings but try to avoid conveying hopelessness. Without diminishing the seriousness of a situation, it is important to keep perspective and convey it to children. Avoid giving young children more specific detail than necessary. Be careful not to frighten children. Limit children's exposure to media coverage of such events.

## Take Action

Children need to know that people are not powerless in the face of man-made or natural disasters; there are many things children and adults can do. Have regular discussions about ways people can address such events and specific steps to make these things happen. Get involved, give back and take action to help children see themselves as people who can contribute to creating a better world.

There is no such thing  
as a perfect parent,  
so just be a real one

Don Adams

