

How to Talk with our Kids when Terrible Things Happen

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As a country, we are deeply affected by the terrible, terrible loss of and injury to the players and staff from the [Humboldt Broncos](https://humboldtstrong.info/) (https://humboldtstrong.info/) hockey team. For many, hockey touches the very heart of our Canadian identity. Even if we are not directly connected to hockey, we understand the dedication and passion that each and every person connected with that team—with any team—brings to the sport. This is a loss that is unfathomable. It is a loss that touches all of us.

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers -- so many caring people in this world."

Fred Rogers

As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, coaches, teachers, neighbours or friends, how do we talk with the children and teens in our lives when these terrible things happen? They are tough conversations to have but they are also very important ones. My colleague, Scott sent me the above quote from Mr. Rogers. It reminds us that we all have a role to play in supporting the kids in our lives.

As a parent, I have always tried to make my first reaction be one of curiosity and interest. My daughter was a high school student at the time of the Columbine shootings. Like so many other high school students, she was terrified that something like that could happen to her. As her mom, I wanted to shoo her fears away, promise her that she was safe. But I knew she would not believe me. Instead, I asked her to tell me what she had been hearing, what the other kids were talking about, what she was thinking, what she was feeling. I told her I understood how frightening this was for her. We did not solve anything, but she became calmer. And felt safer.

Over the years, I learned how important it was to give space in our relationship for her to talk about whatever was in her heart and in her mind. I made many mistakes—sometimes shut her down without meaning to or minimized what she was feeling. Sometimes I was too busy to stop and listen. But she taught me how to get better at it and I found that the more time we took to talk, the less time she spent fretting or feeling afraid.

As a therapist and parenting educator, I also know the importance of helping kids talk about their experiences, and how hard it can be for us as parents and caring adults to allow their stories to

unfold as they would like to tell them. When our children are upset or afraid, we want to help, to solve the problem, to make them feel better. But that rarely works.

How can we listen without interrupting? Without correcting their information? Without telling them not to feel afraid or sad?

Here are a few tips for talking with our kids:

Be willing to talk. Make time for it, if you can. But we all know that kids don't talk on our schedule, they talk on their own. So this means being available when they are ready to talk. Sometimes, that's tricky to figure out or to make happen.

Be curious and interested in what they are thinking and feeling. There is a really good chance that your child will have heard about this particular event, either on TV, the internet or at school. Kids talk with each other. Older kids are going to see everything that we see online, in social media, on TV.

Ask questions—what have you heard? What are you thinking about it? How are you feeling about what happened? Ask about their opinion about what they are hearing—do you believe all that? What do you think about what is being said on social media? In the news? Answer questions, too, if they ask. Try to answer honestly and simply. Keep your answer to the question asked as, often, children are satisfied with one piece of the picture. Too much information can be overwhelming, particularly for younger children.

Try to “read” your child during the conversation and follow their lead.

Maybe your child will just want to say one thing and be done. Maybe they will want to talk now, maybe later. Don't be afraid to bring it up and ask what they have been thinking but also don't worry if they don't want to talk. Kids deal with their emotions in very different ways.

Right now families around the country are putting hockey sticks on their porches, in tribute to those who have died. Or wearing hockey jerseys to school and work. Does your child or teen want to do this? Can you join them in their expression of



grief? These actions bring a sense of community, of connection to others beyond ourselves. Connection helps us feel loved and safe.

Honour and respect their ways of expressing themselves. Children often draw what they are thinking and feeling. Sometimes the drawings can be very graphic and disturbing but it is important to accept them. Help your child to talk about the drawing, what they were thinking as they drew it. If they don't want to talk, that's ok. Just thank them for sharing the picture with you and invite them to talk anytime they would like.

Show empathy and understanding. For any of us, when we feel truly heard and understood, we feel naturally better. [Brene Brown](https://brenebrown.com/) (https://brenebrown.com/) tells us that “empathy fuels connection” and we know that connection with someone we love and trust, makes the world feel safer and our distress more manageable. Simple comments such as “I can see that you are feeling really sad about this” or “I understand how upsetting this is for you” are very powerful messages of love and support.

Ask if there is any way you can help. Or if there is anything they would like to do with you, as part of dealing with their feelings. Do they want to put hockey sticks on the porch? Wear green in support of the Broncos? Can you help them compose what they will post on their social media? Can you draw a picture together? Do an activity that you both enjoy? Whatever will help, it is important that we ask and not assume what our child wants. Sometimes, that is the hardest part—especially if our child says no to any help. It is important to respect that, while adding “I am here if you need me.”

Be aware of our own feelings and reactions to the situation. As parents, we can all imagine the horror of what the parents of these young people are going through. My friend, whose son is an athlete and often goes off on the team bus, told me that her heart is overwhelmed with a huge sense of loss and burden. Even forming the words, “my son...” was impossible. We can't hide these feelings from our children. It's ok if they see that we are upset, too. The trick is to be sure our feelings do not become the focus of our conversations with our children.

Seek outside help, when needed. Talking with a counsellor or a trusted friend can make a big difference. Your children may not want to do this, but you can. And, when you talk with a counsellor or friend, your feelings can very much be the focus. We all need this, sometimes!

Be kind to yourself. It is hard to get these conversations right. It takes practice. We make mistakes. A colleague of mine told me, “there is a lot of pressure on parents to do things

‘right’. I say, blunder through and hope it works out!” What matters is that we are willing to try....and try again.

Loss and tragedy. Sadness. Fear. They’re real emotions and real experiences and when we have the chance to talk about our thoughts and feelings surrounding these kinds of events, we can begin to make sense of what we are feeling. It does not make them go away or make things “better”. But it does help us feel connected. That’s true, no matter how old we are.

Diane McGregor is the Manager of Parenting Now and the Editor of the website. She is also a parent, a caring adult, a therapist and a parenting educator—roles that seem to blend together in her work and her writing. Diane is also often on our chat line so if you see her there, reach out and start a conversation.

Community Resources

There are excellent resources in our community that would be able to help you talk through any concerns you have.

The [Walk In Counselling Clinic](https://www.kwcounselling.com/walk-in-counselling-clinic/) (https://www.kwcounselling.com/walk-in-counselling-clinic/) at KW Counselling Services is available, Thursdays from 12:00 to 6:00 pm.

[Front Door](http://www.frontdoormentalhealth.ca/) (http://www.frontdoormentalhealth.ca/) provides walk in services for youth as well as families. Check out their website for times and locations.

The Parenting Now CHAT Line is staffed by an experienced parent from 10am to 10pm, Monday to Friday and from 6pm to 10pm Saturdays and Sundays. We are available to talk about this or any other parenting concern you have. Go to parentingnow.ca and click on the image at the bottom of the page.



[FamilyCompassWR](https://www.familycompasswr.ca) (https://www.familycompasswr.ca) is a website that can link you to the full range of services for children, youth and families in Waterloo Region. If you are concerned about your child or teen, click through to the *I have a Concern* page and you can be guided to the appropriate starting point agency.