

Talking to Children About Hate Crimes

In addition to the fear associated with mass violence incidents in general, hate crimes create an additional level of distress because the perpetrator targets a particular group of people based on hatred and bias. Hate crimes are intended to produce fear and cause psychological harm among an entire group of people. Common adult responses to hate crimes include fear, anxiety, worry, confusion, and anger. In addition, people may develop distrust of people similar to the perpetrator or avoid locations where they feel they may be targeted. This distrust and avoidance can amplify and worsen psychological symptoms. Children experience similar reactions, and younger children, who may not understand how groups of people are different from one another, may be especially vulnerable. Children may turn to adults for support and guidance following hate crimes, and adults are often unsure of what to say, or how much to say. Here are some strategies to consider when talking to children about what happened:

1. Talk about your reactions with another adult first. Before talking to children about the incident, if you can, take some time to talk with other adults to clarify what you are feeling and make some sense out of your reactions. Kids are not the only ones who benefit from talking to someone. One goal of hate crimes is to make people feel fearful and isolated, so asking other adults for support can help you be supportive to others you care about.

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2. Start the conversation with your child. Don't be afraid to initiate a conversation about the hate crime with your child. Even if you think your child is unaware of the hate crime, your child has access to television, the internet, social media, or even friends, s/he probably already has heard something about it. If your child gets the impression you are uncomfortable talking about the crime, this may increase their fears and worries. It may also make them more reliant on information they have heard from social media or other people, which might not be accurate. Discussing the incident with your child, in developmentally appropriate language, is important to ease their fears.

3. Share accurate information. First ask your child what s/he already knows about the incident. You might be surprised about how much they already know, or by something incorrect that they have heard. Provide the best information you can, at a developmentally appropriate level. If something changes as new facts emerge, you can explain that sometimes things change as people learn more information.

4. Encourage the child to ask questions. After discussing the incident, ask if s/he has any questions. Children understand things differently from adults and may have different fears that would never occur to us. Be sure to listen to the child and answer questions as honestly as possible. If you do not know the answer, be honest with your child about that, too.

5. Understand common reactions. Immediately following a hate crime, it is common for people to have significant worry or anxiety about what happened and what may happen in the future, either to them or to their community. Reactions like increased fearfulness, anxiety, difficulty with attention and concentration, and changes in sleep or appetite are fairly common. These reactions tend to lessen within a few weeks of the event but should be monitored over time.



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6. Discuss safety with your child. Following hate crimes, children may be fearful of their safety or the safety of family members. This can be especially true if children belong to the same group that was targeted in the hate crime. Discussing (or establishing) plans to keep your family safe during crisis may help to reduce your child's fear.

7. Be aware of adult conversations and media exposure. Although we often think children are not paying attention to (or cannot hear) what adults talk about or listen to on TV, they often pick up more than we think. Because of this, try to limit adult conversations or media exposure about the incident when children are present. Children may not hear the full conversation or news story but will often fill in the information they do not hear with misconceptions or inaccurate information. This can cause additional fear and worry.

8. Discuss bias and discrimination with children openly. Children may not understand why some people want to hurt other people on the basis of race, religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or other factors. This is sometimes a difficult concept for adults to understand, and for children it can be even harder. It is important to discuss this with children and to help them understand prejudice and discrimination, and what your family's beliefs are about such issues.

9. Model healthy coping. Finally, it's okay to tell children that you are worried, fearful, or angry about what happened. Sharing this with them, at a level they can understand, can help to normalize these feelings. However, it is also very important to discuss appropriate coping methods that you have used and discuss ways that children can cope with their own feelings. This will help to model ways to handle the intense emotions that often accompany hate crimes.



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Several resources and information on mass violence incidents, including hate crimes, are available for individuals and communities affected by these horrible crimes. Please visit the “Survivors > Self-Help > For Parents and Caregivers” tab at www.nmvvc.org/survivors/self-help for more information about helping children after a hate crime.



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