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Talking to Children about Violence

Melissa Ponce-Rodas

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Talking to Children about Violence

When I heard about the Uvalde elementary school shooting last May, I was in the car with my husband and children—two ten-year-olds, two fourth-graders—just like the children who had been murdered.



▲ Melissa Ponce-Rodas

My heart sank, my chest felt heavy; as the tears were forming, I quickly changed the radio station. I could not listen to more details. My heart could not hold the pain. How did you respond? While I turned off the news and hugged my kids tight, I allowed the tears to come, and the emotions to be felt, because my body and brain needed to process what had happened.

Unfortunately, over the years, we've seen our society surrounded by violence and death. I've been fortunate to learn what I need to do to take care of myself, how to process the information in pieces, so that my mental health does not suffer too much. First, I remember how fearfully and wonderfully made I am, in the image of my loving Creator, so I understand that my body and brain were not intended to experience the violence and death that sin has brought. Then, I've learned ways to work through my reactions to these events, so that I can stay healthy—mentally and physically.

Here, I will reference several pieces that have been written in response to violence and tragedies so you, too, can find the tools to help you and your family process what is going on. Just remember, not every tip works for everyone—try them and see what works for you and your family. Your first step is to take care of yourself, as discussed in this school shooting resource (<https://bit.ly/3zHpyJf>). And, if your emotions or worry or grief are greater than you can process alone, look for help from a counselor, a social worker, a clergy or a doctor. We are all trained to help you find

the resources that work best for you.

For both adults and kids, almost every resource, including the National Association of School Psychologists (<https://bit.ly/3BZPpyV>), will start with limiting exposure to information. Many suggest that you choose to read information over watching it reported. Why? Because we want to limit how many senses are impacted when getting this difficult information. It can be less traumatic to only read about something, than to watch it.

You want to ask what kids have heard so far, to start a dialogue and meet them where they are at. An NPR article (<https://n.pr/3QczKko>) summarizes this approach from a media psychologist, which allows kids to tell you what they know, and creates a safe space for them to ask questions.

Maintaining a routine can also be helpful, as you process this information. It gives kids some stability and control. But it is also okay to make changes as needs arise, both for you and your family. Do what seems best for you and ask for help if you need it.

Lastly, don't forget that this is hard. We weren't designed for this. But our God has made ways for us to work through the violence and death that sin has brought. With prayer and supplication, we can surrender our pain to God, and care for ourselves as we work to be lightbearers in the midst of this tragedy. My favorite quote in times like these is from Mr. Rogers—"look for the helpers." And if we are called, may we also *be* them—agents of change for a better world. ■

Melissa Ponce-Rodas is assistant professor of Psychology and vice-chair, School of Social & Behavioral Sciences at Andrews University.

