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Tips for Discussing Traumatic Events with your Children

1. Process your own emotions before trying to address the situation with your children.
2. Find out what they know. Ask questions like, "What did you hear?" or "Do you have any questions?"
3. Only share what's necessary. If an event does not directly affect your family or child, young children may not need to know. For school-age kids say, "I need to tell you about something that happened. I know you'll hear about it, and I want it to come from me so we can talk about it."
4. Keep it simple and age appropriate. For example, if a shooting occurs you can say, "Someone hurt people." If an idea is too complicated to explain, it may be unnecessary.
5. Follow your child's lead and don't overtalk. Once you've discussed the topic, you can wait until your child asks questions to discuss again. Check in if you notice anything concerning.
6. Avoid watching, reading, or talking about the news in front of your children. If you can't avoid the news, distract your child with a game, book, or other activity. If you have older children that want to watch or read the news, stay with them so you can discuss.
7. Allow your child to express their fears and emotions. Some kids may cry, some may act out. Some will want quiet time with you. Some like to talk. Let them know it's OK to feel whatever they are feeling. If older children are feeling energized to take action, find ways for them to volunteer.
8. Help them feel secure. Tell them that they're safe, that you're always there for them, and that there are many people working to make sure this does not happen again.
9. Pay attention to how they're acting. Changes in mood or behavior could be a sign that children are struggling emotionally and need extra love and support.
10. Make it a normal day. Keep your typical schedule so kids feel the safety of regularity.
11. Once you have your emotions managed, it's OK to talk to your older children about what you're feeling. Saying you're sad, mad, or whatever else models emotional maturity and invites empathy and compassion. Save the really strong emotions for your adult support community.
12. Practice self-care. Talk to your child about things you do to feel better when you're upset. Common coping strategies include calming thoughts, breathing exercises, physical exercise, prayer, music, nature, and time with friends.
13. Help your child come up with their own list of self-care strategies.