

Talking to Kids About Current Events

The recent mass shootings at a 4th of July parade in Highland Park, Illinois and at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas has left lives shattered. Images of the parade route, the school, frightened parents and angry politicians have saturated the 24 hour news cycle, and our kids are watching.

News that could be confusing at best – or scary at worst – is circulating on-air and online, and many parents are left to wonder how to talk to their children about unsettling current events.

“The conversation really should be about the child. Give them permission to express their feelings. Make sure that they understand it’s important for them to be expressing their opinions, their viewpoints, their feelings. We want to make sure that they are hearing from us as the parent that we care about what they think. We care about what they are feeling,” explains Kyle Boerke, PsyD, an OSF HealthCare clinical child psychologist.

As information comes in, children may misinterpret what they hear, and might be frightened by something they don’t understand. Dr. Boerke says the first step parents should take is to simply ask kids what they know, and then talk about it truthfully, in a way that is appropriate for the age and developmental level of their child.

“We want them to know the information that I am giving to them is something that they can trust that is accurate. So if they are hearing me fiddle with the truth one way or another and they have a teacher at school that is having a conversations with them, that is going to put kind of a doubt in their head. So it is important to be open and honest with them at that age appropriate level. That way they know that they can trust you as a parent and your discretion,” he says.

And while the topic of the day might be divisive, parents can use the current environment as a teaching opportunity. Dr. Boerke reminds us that our kids are watching our reactions to current events and how we treat those with differing opinions or outlooks.

“We have the ability to model how we agree with or how we disagree with something in an appropriate way, and especially in a time like this when the country is so divided, that is a really important thing for us to model – appropriate ways to disagree or have different opinions from other people,” urges Dr. Boerke.

And Dr. Boerke says one of the most important things a parent can do is to reassure kids that they are safe.

During unsettling times, sometimes kids can have trouble coping. Dr. Boerke says signs of that include changes in behavior like nightmares, a child not sleeping, new fears, a lack of concentration or unusual moods.

If a parent notices these changes are ongoing, and talking with the child doesn’t seem to alleviate the fear, Dr. Boerke suggests speaking to your child’s pediatrician to get a referral to a behavioral health provider.