

How to Talk to Children During a Crisis: Guidelines for Teachers and Parents
Project Chai – Chai Lifeline

Crisis situations bring with them a mix of strong emotions including fear, confusion, and feelings of helplessness. Addressing the worries of young students can be a great challenge, yet children need reliable information. It is far better for a child to hear what is going on from a trustworthy source such as a teacher or parent, than to hear rumors on the playground. Our job as adults is to share adequate information with children and to help them assimilate the information in terms they understand. Children also need a sense of security, particularly during these times of uncertainty and must have a place to express their feelings. Thus, an open discussion is invaluable during this time.

Below are some guidelines on to how to talk with your children:

Accurate Information:

1. Allow the children to tell you what they have heard.
2. Tell as much about the situation as the child is interested in knowing. You do not need to provide all the details. Often the broad outlines are sufficient
3. Allow plenty of time and space for questions over the ensuing days.
4. Answer all questions even if they are difficult or frightening.
5. Answer all questions truthfully. Again, this doesn't mean that you need to overwhelm the child with detail.
6. Listen and respond without trying to take over or lead the conversation.
7. Limit children's exposure to the media.
8. Be willing to provide explanations over and over again. Repetition helps the child understand the complexities of the world and make him feel more secure.
9. Be careful not to share information which the family or authorities do not approve of.
10. It is permissible and even advisable to say "I don't know."

Feelings:

1. Encourage children to disclose what they are thinking about and feeling. Do not interpret or put words into their mouths.
2. Convey the message that feelings of fear and anger which your child may have are perfectly normal and acceptable.
3. There is no need to feel embarrassed or ashamed of these or any other feelings.
4. Say something like "Many children feel this way" or "It's fine to feel this way".
5. Be reassuring without making promises. Maintain a hopeful positive posture while validating that many people are worried and want to help find him.
6. It is all right to share some of our own feelings with children but be careful not to overwhelm them with very strong feelings.

Actions:

1. Offer children constructive involvement such as engaging in tehilim or prayer.
2. Maintaining regular routine is very helpful in creating and maintaining a sense of security.
3. Talking with a designated adult such as teacher or rabbi, can help students feel that they have a role in helping, and will help comfort them.
4. Teachers and parents are encouraged to seek guidance from those more informed including competent mental health professionals in the school and the community as well as Project Chai staff.

Remember: A frank discussion with children during difficult times can do a world of good!

- A talk can clear up a lot of confusion and uncertainty.
- A talk shows the child we are taking an interest in him, his thoughts and feelings.
- A talk can prevent unnecessary fears.
- A talk encourages and develops a child's natural desire to understand the world around him.
- A talk gives him a sense of control and ability.

We invite you to contact us if you have any questions or need further suggestions or guidance:

CRISIS@chailifeline.org
855-3-CRISIS

Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox

Director of Interventions and Community Education, Project Chai