

UCSF child-trauma expert offers advice on how to talk to kids

December 17 2012, by Lisa Cisneros



(Medical Xpress)—Following the tragic shooting at an elementary school in Connecticut, UCSF child-trauma expert Patricia Van Horn, JD, PhD, says parents should be honest with their children about what happened.

A good source for [parents](#), teachers and [school administrators](#) alike is the

National Center for Traumatic Stress Network, which offers concrete advice on what to do in the aftermath of tragedies like the one at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Van Horn, director of the Infant, Child and Adolescent Services and associate director of the Child Trauma Research Program at the UCSF-affiliated San Francisco General Hospital and [Trauma Center](#), says parents should provide the facts about such incidents within what's developmentally age-appropriate for them to hear.

Parents should give their children an opportunity to express their feelings about what happened, she says. "Listen to what they have to say and validate their feelings."

"It is very important that parents be as reassuring as they can realistically be," Van Horn says. "I would talk to young children about the ways in which their families and their school is working to protect them."

What Schools Can Do

At school, children gathered in group settings should be focused on sharing their feelings and not relaying gory details about what happened or their previous experiences with violence, Van Horn advises.

"The risk is that [in groups] kids can get their peers more and more aroused and it becomes a group contagion, generating more fear and alarm," she says.

Schools should offer counseling and give children a place to express their feelings, she explains. Schools also should inform parents about their practices and policies they have in place that are designed to ensure the safety and security of the school community.

"It would be good for schools to reach out to parents in their communities so that administrators can explain what their [emergency procedures](#) are and parents can explain them to their kids. The more details parents can share about the various steps in place to enhance safety, the less frightened kids will be."

Once parents are informed, they can then relay to their children how the school is working to protect them and use that information to offer reassurance "so [children](#) can relax and learn."

"It's good for parents to know from the school exactly what the school is doing to show that administrators are aware of the shooting and has a plan for keeping kids safe," Van Horn says.

More information: [www.nctsnet.org/sites/all/modu ... shooting.pdf&nid=113](http://www.nctsnet.org/sites/all/modu...shooting.pdf&nid=113)
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