



December 16, 2012

Dear Henry Ford Academy Families:

On Friday, our nation and the world learned of a tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. While all indications are that this is an isolated incident very far away from our schools, we want to remain sensitive to our families' needs and concerns.

The American Psychological Association (APA) indicates if children ask questions, talking to them about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them. What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there for them and listening to them.

If you are unsure of what to say or how to handle questions, please know that your school social worker can assist with those conversations and give you tips on how to age-appropriately speak with a child.

We would like to share with you a list of tips from the National Association of School Psychologists about what parents can do at times like this:

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately. The American Pediatrics Association also suggests that families encourage children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.
2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily.
3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
  - Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them.
  - Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
  - Upper middle school and high school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

4. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.
6. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

When a tragedy like this happens, it reminds us of how precious life is and how fortunate we are to work with our community's young people. Consider Henry Ford Academy: School for Creative Studies and Henry Ford Academy: Elementary School to be in a precautionary and reflective mode regarding our own buildings, students and staff safety. Please continue to help us by being our eyes and ears on campus and reporting any safety concerns you notice. We will stay ever diligent to keep our schools safe. If you have additional questions, please contact your building principal.

Please join us in sending thoughts of compassion, hope and healing to the Sandy Hook Elementary School community.

**Curtis L. Lewis, Ph.D**

Principal

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