

National Benevolent Association (NBA)

“Human Tragedy in the News”, December 2012

On December 14, 2012, the community of Newtown, Connecticut, experienced tremendous tragedy and loss of loved ones following a violent shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school. David Lundeen M.S.W., NBA Vice President of Mission and Ministry and a social worker with over twenty years of experience, reflects on important questions following this violent and sorrowful situation.

When there are tragedies such as the one in Newtown, CT, on the news, we know how important it is to help our children deal with such tragic information. How can we help our children feel more secure?

When our children are exposed to this kind of horrific violence against children or any other human being, it is extremely important that we answer any questions they may have and help them to express any feelings they may have in ways that are age appropriate and in ways that are appropriate for the individual child. The manner in which we respond is equally as important.

Children will express themselves in both their behavior and verbally. Parents need to observe their children to see if there are changes in mood and affect. It may be that your child is suddenly more withdrawn or needing to just be around you more than usual. He/she may be more sensitive and more easily upset than usual. The opposite is true as well. Your child might be playing more aggressively or having a hard time getting along with his/her peers. The important thing is to be aware of these changes and then to interact with your child in ways that will help him/her to express their feelings.

For a child who finds it hard to verbalize, it is always good to give them nonverbal ways in which they can express themselves. Simply sitting with them and having them draw their family, their classroom, or some other place in which they interact with their friends can give you a picture of their feelings and a way to begin a conversation about what the picture means. Giving them an opportunity to draw a face which depicts how they are feeling or (many of us have seen the chart of faces that show faces expressing feelings) asking them to point to a face that expresses how they are feeling.

In responding to their non-verbal and verbal communication, we must always work to answer in ways that are age appropriate. We should not burden them with information and facts that will only make them more insecure. That is why it is important to listen or observe

in ways that reveal their concerns. Simple questions like “Are you scared?” “What worries you?” “What do think happened?” “What would make you feel better?” Then it is easier to respond with words that provide a sense of support and security. “Let’s talk about ways we can help each other feel better.” “Would you like to help me in what I am doing?”

It is a process that works if you really listen to what your child is expressing, clarify with your child his/her feelings and needs, and then respond with reassurance, appropriate information and a sharing of your own feelings.

How important is it to allow and share our expressions of feelings and emotions after such a tragedy?

It is equally important that we share our own feelings in a way that models for our children. It is okay to say you are sad or scared or worried as long as you equally share with them how you positively handle those feelings. Be honest and share that you may not have answers to why terrible things happen.

You can help your children feel secure by being present for them, especially now. Let them know you love them verbally, with hugs, and by being inclusive with them. At the same time, you must take your cue from them so that you aren’t increasing their anxiety by smothering them excessively. You will have to judge your child’s needs.

There is an excellent resource for you which not only expands on this information but is a resource for teachers, first responders, and anyone else who is affected by tragedies such as this. It is sponsored by the School Social Work Association of America.

<http://sswaa.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1@subarticlenbr=500>

What are some ways I can better understand and negotiate all the media coverage of this tragedy?

We need to have an understanding that the media, while wanting to be sensitive to listeners, will often show the most graphic parts of a tragedy repeatedly. It is always a good idea to limit the exposure of media coverage for our children because it tends to perpetuate their anxiety. We need to be vigilant because we often are not even aware that our children are listening or watching as we watch the news. The ever presence of social media is hard to escape as well. As in all things, it is important that we know what our children are exposing themselves to and be prepared to have open conversations with them about how that exposure is effecting them.

What are ways that I can help support children and other young people in my communities to help prevent such tragedies?

Our communities have many resources for helping children, youth and families when they experience trauma and tragedy. These agencies and resources can be found easily through United Way or through contact with the local Mental Health Board or even the yellow pages. These programs and services are available to help families and children before tragedy occurs, and during a crisis. They need volunteers to be mentors. They need families to open their homes as foster parents, and adoptive parents.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has many such agencies and services to help children and young people. These agencies serve many areas of the country. A list is included below in the event you would like to speak with one of them and/or be supportive of their work.

It is equally important to increase our awareness of the community and neighborhood in which we live and work. We need to ask ourselves if there are ways we can become more involved with and supportive of those who live and interact with us on a daily basis. We should consider volunteering to help support local activities for children. We should take the time to get to know our neighbors especially our children and families suffering with issues of mental illness. We can help to assure they are receiving the professional support and accessing service programs that are in our local areas. We can be a part of fostering true communities of compassion and care.

Resource List of Disciples-related Children's Agencies

(Alabama)	Christian Services for Children in Alabama Selma, Alabama (P) 334/875-0608 (Web) www.cscalabama.org
(Colorado)	Tennyson Center for Children at Colorado Christian Home Denver & Littleton, Colorado (toll free) 877/224-8223 (P) 303/433-2541 (Web) www.childabuse.org
(Mississippi)	Southern Christian Services for Children and Youth Jackson & Tupelo, Mississippi (P) 601/354-0983 (Web) www.scscy.org

(Nebraska)

Child Saving Institute

Bellevue & Omaha, Nebraska (P) 402/553-6000 (Web) www.childsaving.org

(Ohio)

Cleveland Christian Home

Cleveland, Ohio (P) 216/671-0977 (Web) www.cchome.org