

## **Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth**

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## **Community Tragedy** **Stress, Trauma and Media Overload**

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There will be a great deal of media coverage focusing on the movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado. While many networks and cable outlets may take appropriate steps to avoid showing traumatic or graphic images there will be some print, television and radio organizations flooding the environment with reminders of this horrific community tragedy and its aftermath. It is possible to limit media consumption in your home, but you may not have control over what your children see and hear outside of the house.

Over the past decade media messages of destruction, violence, injury and loss have changed the social environment of young people. These events include 9/11, Columbine, Virginia Tech, natural disasters and other mass casualties. Researchers have found that contact with such events, *through the media*, can negatively impact children's emotional functioning and perceptions of the world. To counterbalance the potential of such negative influences, it is important to create a plan of action that will minimize and hopefully avoid media overload. In addition to the importance of developing 'media literacy' skills in the home (i.e. understanding why and how media messages are sent) there are other factors to consider when preparing a family media plan:

- How closely your family members and friends were impacted by this event.
- The ages of your children.
- Other losses or traumatic events experienced by your family.

### **Be Prepared**

First, think about how and why media texts (TV programs and news, movies, radio, newspapers and magazines, internet, social networking, music, etc) are used. Consider the questions below to help your children understand media messages as well (The Center for Media Literacy):

- Who created this message and why are they sending it?
  - Providing information to the public on the tragedy.
  - Compare this to the "saturation" experienced with other events (Superbowl, elections, the Olympics, Academy awards, etc.)
- What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
  - Dramatic approaches, music, re-enactments, graphic images, interviews with victims, etc.
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in this message?
- What is omitted from this message? Why do you think it was left out?
  - Balance tragedy with resilience and recovery.
  - What are the positive things that came after, for the community, the nation, and the world? How did people reach out and help each other?
- How might different people interpret this message?
  - People who were directly affected? Lost a family member or friend?
  - Children too young to understand.

### **Suggestions For Children And Adolescents**

Under 13 Years: Viewing any programming related to the shooting *should* be preceded by family discussion of what happened (to the best of the adults' knowledge). Children under 7 years of age should not watch any programming or news reports.

To begin the conversation, *first ask* your children/teens what they've heard (from friends, other parents, classmates, and the media) and what questions they have. You will need to provide them with factual information, i.e. when we talk about the human loss during the shooting, it is also important to point out that many people survived, reached safety, helped each other and received immediate medical care.

Over 14 Years: Young people over 14 years will be especially focused on the circumstances of this event- a popular movie, a midnight showing, summer time activities that they have most likely participated in themselves in the past. These experiences are worth exploring and provide an opportunity to clarify misconceptions and reassure safety procedures. In addition, you may need to clarify and provide factual information.

**Watch with Your Family:** It is strongly recommended that school age children/teens of any age should NOT watch any shooting-related programming alone. They should be with caring adults, family members, and good friends. First determine if the program will be appropriate for your children (age, personal experience). By joining with your child/teen you will know the exact content of the program as well as the context of the information. You will also have the opportunity to observe their reactions (tearfulness, fidgeting, crying, very quiet or even "silly" remarks or behaviors). Look for these signs that your child may be experiencing intensified fears or anxieties or changed behaviors such as sleeplessness, stomach distress, crying, or worrying about safety and security. Do not ask, "Are you okay?" or "Are you upset?" Instead point out the behavior you have noticed and ask what he/she is thinking or feeling, "I see you are kind of quiet, tell me what you're thinking?" You also have the benefit of offering comfort and security to your child or teen through physical proximity.

**Talk and Share:** If you and your family do watch/listen/read about the tragedy, talk about it and reactions to it, the physical reactions as well as feelings and thoughts. Plan time to talk in a quiet, comfortable and familiar place. Don't let children/teens go to bed without having a chance to talk about their reactions, even if you think they are "okay."

Share your own thoughts and feelings. Don't hesitate to "open" communication with your own reactions. If you cry, don't try to hide it, acknowledge that this event has affected many people. However, *be confident* about safety and security issues. Children take their cues from adults and how we respond to media; they will watch your behavior and determine if they really are safe. Praise your children when they suggest their own hopeful and positive thoughts.

Acknowledge children's/teen's feelings. Recognize, accept and respect your children's feelings. Let them know that others feel the same way.

Provide reassurance regarding safety and security in simple, age-appropriate words. Don't give false reassurance; be realistic and honest without being an alarmist.

**Explore Self-Care Strategies:** Let children and teens know that there are ways to feel better as we cope with uncomfortable feelings. Help them identify what provides relief and support. Encourage them to use those strategies, especially talking to others about their feelings. Read/tell a favorite story before bed, offer a favorite food or drink, play favorite or relaxing music, give/get a hug, talk and depending on your beliefs, pray or meditate.

- Check in the next morning: how did your family sleep, were there any dreams, disturbing thoughts, etc.

For those who have recently experienced loss or another crisis, viewing and reading about stories and programs related to the shooting may bring back feelings from these earlier traumas.