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Experts: talk, not TV, will help ease young fears in wake of Connecticut school shooting

Turn off the television and talk to your kids.

That's the advice from experts for parents worried about how the Connecticut school shooting will affect children around the country as they prepare to return to class Monday.

The images of crying, terrified children being led from the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., after Friday's shooting can haunt children a continent away.

"Children are always listening and always watching," said Gerard Costa, a psychologist and director of the Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health at Montclair State University.

While it's important to acknowledge children's feelings and answer questions about the mass shooting, parents should not dwell on the details.

"We should advocate proactive information but I would avoid graphic descriptions," Costa said. "It's really important to turn the TV off."

Don't assume you can shield school-age kids from a national news story. It is likely to be discussed in classrooms, on school buses and playgrounds tomorrow. In a few days, there will likely be images of funerals with small caskets as the 20 dead children are mourned.

"The way word travels now, it's not like they're going to hear it in dribs and drabs," said Joe Colford, president of the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists and a faculty member at Georgian Court University. "They don't need the nitty-gritty, they just need a general overview."

Local school districts are already preparing for the dialogue that will occur Monday morning with young, inquisitive — and perhaps fearful — minds, said Richard Bozza, the executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. Some superintendents have already sent letters to parents and are preparing for classroom and small group discussions about the killings.

"This tragedy will affect every school in America and beyond," Bozza said.

As a precaution, North Brunswick plans to increase police presence at its schools tomorrow, and make counseling available to any students who may need it, said School Superintendent Brian Zychowski. Officials reached out to families of North Brunswick's 6,200 students on Friday after the tragedy in Connecticut.

"We want to allay some of the fears," Zychowski said. "Our hearts and prayers went out to all the families in that school district."

North Brunswick Director of School Security Mike Misurell, a retired police captain, said he will "debrief" school leaders Monday, and also review of district security. North Brunswick already locks all exterior school doors, has aides monitoring doors, and has cameras throughout the schools. But, Misurell

said, officials may want to enhance security further by adding cameras, or "target-harden" by doing things such as replacing glass in doors.

"Law enforcement plans for the worst and expects the best," he said.

In Mountain Lakes, Superintendent Anne Mucci said school officials also reached out to parents. She has a personal connection to Newtown, Conn. as well — her parents lived there for a time before she was born.

"It's so hard when you see a town very much like Mountain Lakes. You feel for the families. I can't even put it into words," she said.

She said Mountain Lakes will continue to work closely with local police, and revise and update security plans.

Her district will also have counselors available Monday.

"But you can't prepare for this kind of disaster. It's horrible," she said.

Experts said it is essential to temper the truth for children with reassurance: You are safe. Your school is safe.

"You need to widen the circle of safety," said Anthony D'Urso, the supervising psychologist at the Audrey Hepburn Children's House at Hackensack University Medical Center. "We certainly want the kids to get back into their routines."

If a child is having trouble sleeping, not eating or showing other signs of extreme anxiety, parents should consult a doctor for additional help.

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