



## Ep. 12: Talking with children about gun violence and school shootings

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** [00:00:00] Hello, I'm Dr. Kimberly Bell, host of the Hidden Language of Children Podcast and clinical director at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio. Our podcast is devoted to understanding how best to support our children's developing minds. One of our guiding principles is that children can get through anything that can be talked about.

Today, sadly, we put that to the test with one of the most difficult conversations that parents now face on a regular basis. About 24 hours ago, there was yet another mass shooting at a school. Multiple children died. In this special segment of our podcast, we're going to talk about how to talk about it with your kids.

To do that, we're flipping the script on our usual format. Our producer, Bob Rosenbaum, will be asking me the questions and I'll be responding.

You ready to go, Bob?

I suppose I am Kim, thanks.. I've raised three kids. They're all grown now, all managed to get through through school safely, [00:01:00] fortunately. But I did live through that, that period where every time you heard about a shooting like this, as a parent, you can't help internalizing it and putting your children in the place of those victims. So in my own way, I've indirectly lived through it many, many times as I'm sure parents are today. So let's start there. When you're on an airplane and the face masks come down; in the safety briefing they always tell you: Grownups put the face mask on first and then tend to your children. So before parents are able to turn to their children and work with them through whatever the children are feeling , what do parents need?

OK, so the buzzword you're going to be hearing is regulation, emotional regulation. In just our most recent podcast, we were talking to Tovah Klein about resiliency, and this is really the time when we are counting on the resiliency, not just of our children, but of our grownups.

And I'm going to speak not [00:02:00] just to parents. I want to speak to parents, I want to speak to teachers, I want to speak to administrators, grownups in general. And I think I want to start with something that Mr. Rogers had always said, but also something I think he got from Anna Freud, which is that in these troubled times, you always want to look to the helpers. And you want to focus on spending time with the helpers, and that's going to come in sort of later in our conversation a little bit.



But for parents, the idea is when we say, put your oxygen mask on first, what we mean by that is that you need to get your emotions somewhat sorted. So it's important that you have your reaction, you have your sadness, you have your fear, you have your anger but manage that for yourself before you begin to [00:03:00] help your child process their feelings.

Does that mean you shouldn't cry together? No. It does not mean that. It means make sure you're clear how you are doing before you try to help your child. There's a lot that we can do for the children in our life to help them be resilient, to help them feel safe.

But first and foremost, we have to be able to process our big emotions so that we can help them process theirs.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Even the youngest children are going to find information about this or, or it's going to come across their paths in some way, shape, or form. So let me start with a really basic question. What if your child doesn't mention anything about the school shooting?

What if your child just keeps going on like there's nothing wrong? Do you say something?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** OK, so let's talk about that. Let's start with this concept that we have called "Experience-Near and Experience-Far." OK? Whenever there's any kind of incident like this and there are difficult things to talk about, the first thing we want to assess is how [00:04:00] near to the experience is the child, both emotionally and geographically.

So we're talking to a very broad audience here. If you are in a different state, if you are three cities over, you as an adult may be impacted more than your child. And so what you want to do is assess for yourself the experience near or farness of any particular event to your child, because we don't want to overload them with unnecessary information, but we don't want to also be in denial.

OK? That's Point One. Point Two is, as you are assessing that need, that nearness and farness, you need to assess who your child is in contact with outside of your home. Because we always want to say, well, my child doesn't even know it happened, or My child doesn't even know, or my child wasn't listening when I was on the phone.

And the truth of the [00:05:00] matter is, is if you really want to test that out, all you have to do is think about a time when you were maybe talking on the phone and the words Popsicle or ice cream, or is something else exciting came out of your mouth and your kids went what? Their brains are always listening, even if they're not consciously paying attention, and so you need to assess that.

Also, if you have a child who's going off to school, you are not always in control of what that child hears or, or doesn't hear from kids at school, so you need to just be prepared. The next point is how do you start a conversation? OK. If you know that your child has heard something,



then you can begin a conversation and you can say, so, I'm sure that you've heard that there was a very scary thing that happened.

I just want you to know that we can talk about anything. [00:06:00] That is the invitation.

And if a child says, well, I don't want to talk about it. Then you can, and they acknowledge knowing about it, then you can say something very specific like, OK, but a lot of big feelings can happen, and so I just want you to know that I'm here when you want to talk about it, and then you step back and then you observe.

And we're going to be observing for changes in behavior. This doesn't mean a particular symptom, it means a change in behavior for your child. So if your child is usually very introverted, then maybe they become irritable. Or if your child is usually very extroverted, all of a sudden they maybe don't want to leave the house.

Or maybe they start canceling play dates. Any change significant in your child. So it can be a lot of different behaviors, but the [00:07:00] key is, you know, your child. If something feels off, then there's another conversation to have, which is, I've noticed you doing this behavior right? I've noticed you aren't sleeping quite as well.

I noticed that you were up in the middle of the night last night. I think maybe you're having a feeling or you're having some questions and it's really important that we can talk about them. So you want to slowly draw children out, because what we risk doing if we don't do that is we risk overwhelming them with information they didn't need. And we want to stay what we call in feeling touch with the child. We want to stay in tune with what that child needs from us.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Older kids are going to need different information than younger kids, I would assume. So maybe, maybe let's start with, with the younger children. You say

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Mm-hmm.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** you don't want to overload them with information. What are the limits?

What are the kinds of things they [00:08:00] need to know and the kinds of things they don't need to know? What are the kinds of things that they're already thinking about, whether we know it or not, and the kinds of things that they're not likely to be putting together at

let's say preschool, kindergarten, first, ...

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** So at those ages, what children need to know is that they're safe. That's just, that's the truth of it. First of all, you want to say what questions do you have? Or what do you think happened? Right? A hard conversation always should start with a question, because what we want to find out is with their limited brain abilities, what answers have children created for



themselves? Because nine times out of 10, the thing that's causing them to be up at night or irritable is whatever they've made up in their head to understand something that's going on in the world and they don't have all the necessary information. But most often children are worried about, am I unsafe now? I felt safe, but this happened two towns over. Now I feel [00:09:00] unsafe. This happened at my school and I'm OK and my friend is not. That is. A different question. That is a why them? Why not me? Am I safe moving forward? So there's going to be a lot of talk about safety, and I don't always, I do mean physical safety, but I also mean emotional safety.

Are the grownups here to protect me? Are the grownups here to hold me inside of my nightmares my worries, my anxieties. And so the process of helping children with this is not what do we do the day after? It's what do we do in a week? Because sometimes it takes that long for shock to wear off. So again, we're talking about a spectrum from experienced near to experience far.

And with experience far, if they've heard somebody talk about it at school, it may be enough to just say, well, what are your questions? And remind them that they're safe and that the grownups are [00:10:00] doing everything they can to keep you safe .

Those kinds of reassurances, that the grownups can handle it. Because the truth of the matter is, is no matter how many times we have our kids practice, they are relying on the grownups. They just do not have the emotional muscle developed to manage these kinds of situations, and so they are completely reliant on the grownups to help them build the emotional muscle through what is a too-big event.

Right. Like we often talk about learning to manage the world in bearable bits. We talked recently about building resiliency through bearable bits of disappointment and frustration. When we have something like a school shooting or any major scary event, it does not appear that anybody's in control.

Even the grownups and the grownups may be saying to themselves, I don't feel safe either. I don't feel in control either, but we are the grownups. We have to find our [00:11:00] resiliency and we have to be able to say to our children, I will always do everything I can to keep you safe. And that's really what they need to hear.

They don't need to hear your own insecurities about whether or not we can keep our kids safe in this world. Those are for us to deal with, not for our children. Our children need reassurance.

Your doubt is about your own resiliency . I really do recommend people go and take a look at our previous podcast on resiliency because it's all in there. Children need to be held and feel safe, not just in the outside world, but in their inside world of, of big feelings.

And that's what makes them resilient in the face of all of this.



**Bob Rosenbaum:** I think one of the, the typical outcomes you would expect would be reluctance to go to school. How do you deal with that?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Well, I'm going to be honest about this kind of thing. If you're talking about experience near, then you're going to have a lot of kids having these same feelings and maybe, maybe, we do gradual separation [00:12:00] processes. Maybe the parents are available in the school for a little bit.

Maybe parents are available by phone a little bit. Maybe they do part of a day and then extend the day, right? When we, you know, we're so worried all the time about school and cognitive development that we put it over and above the emotional development of our children. And if you have a child who's having panic attacks in school, I promise you they're not learning.

So we have to deal with the emotional piece ahead of time, and that's where parents have to partner with school administrators, teachers, social workers, to make sure that you are addressing the emotional needs of your child. Is it great to stay home? No, it's not great to stay home for an extended period of time because one of the strongest symptoms of anxiety is avoidance. And man, it's not an easy one to overcome even for grownups, because why? Because avoidance is 100% effective. [00:13:00] Scared of something, don't do it, not scared anymore. It's not an easy thing to overcome. So it takes patience, understanding and it takes managing things in bearable bits and in cooperation between schools and parents.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Can there be a rebound? The child's going to school and all of a sudden there's an issue?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** We often see that with older children because the older children have a little bit of resiliency and so their defenses kind of kick in and maybe they are the children that become the helpers. Right. They identify with the grownups, especially adolescents. So they want to become the helpers. They want to bring cookies to somebody.

They want to organize events, they want to be part of memorials, they want to be part of all of that. And all of that is fantastic, but that is not all there is to healing. And so sometimes those kids don't experience the [00:14:00] internal grief and processing of the shock until everything gets quiet again, until the memorial services are over, until the crisis intervention helpers that are in the building leave. You know, when everything goes back to normal and they're not caught up in the doing of something, that's when those kids need to be watched closely when there's nothing left to do.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Yeah. Any, any adult who has experienced close loss or loss of a parent or a spouse or a loved one knows exactly what you're talking about.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Oh, for sure. We need to be on the lookout for it. Because, you know, the thing we want most for our children is for them to have not had to have these experiences and these feelings, and so we can convince ourselves they're fine when they're not fine. So again, I



would say look for increases in irritability, look for changes in level of wanting to be home and wanting to be away. Maybe all of a sudden [00:15:00] they don't want to do sleepovers anymore or whatever it might be – a change. As an adult, don't let your own defense against this idea that your children have been impacted keep you from, from noticing, you know, these kinds of things.

And now I will say this: They, they do these drills all the time, and so when you talk to them, they can seem very callous about it and unmoved by it.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Because they're like, yeah, this is the world I've grown up in. This is a thing that happens and I don't know how many years it'll take for us to not feel that as adults, right?, as adults who grew up in a world that didn't have this. These, these 20 somethings have had this their whole school experience, right? These, these active shooter drills and things of that nature.

So we just need to keep a close eye on our kids because this isn't an easy world to live in.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** So let's talk a little bit then about the older children.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Mm-hmm.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Many of them are going to high schools [00:16:00] that already have metal detectors. Many high schools already have armed resource officers.

So absent a direct prompt from your high school age child or your older adolescent,

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Mm-hmm.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** how do you start the conversation with them?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Well, I think, as you know, Bob, I'm a huge fan of open communication between parents and children. And that's not always easy in adolescence because their job in adolescence is to separate from you. The adage here at Hanna Perkins is a mother's job is to be there to be left. A father's job is to be there to be left, and that means that you tolerate the coming and the going of your child emotionally from you.

And so they may be hesitant. But being able to say to your child, look, there are a lot of things going on in the world, and as a parent I just want to know that you know you can always come to me. So there are going to be some difficult conversations that we're going to have, and it's not going to be easy for either [00:17:00] one of us, but we're going to have these conversations and we're going to get through 'em and we're going to be better for it.





And that's the relationship ideally that you have with your adolescent because they can hate you tomorrow. But today we're going to have this conversation, right?

And in my experience, the more you're able to do that, the more you're going to find that when you're adolescent really needs you, that they're going to come back because it doesn't feel like a failure to come back.

It can be safe coming back in times of stress when it doesn't feel like that's going to be permanent. When you hold a knowledge with them and for them that this is a temporary coming back and being needy,

and tomorrow when you've gotten through this and we've gotten you through this, I'm still going to let you go and I still trust you to go. That's what I'm talking about.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** OK, what the youngest child most [00:18:00] needs to hear is, you are safe. I am going to do everything I can to keep you safe. What do the older children need to hear?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Two things. The first one, same thing. I am here. I am your home base. When you are scared, you come to me and I will keep you safe. And then when you feel safe again, then we will launch and you will go back to being the strong, resilient part-adult that you are.

Right? But secondly, I think they need to know that you have faith in them. That they know what to do and it is helpful at that age for them to be helpers. If you have an adolescent who's particularly emotionally sensitive, which is a lot of them these days, and they want to do something maybe as a family, for them to feel like they, they're doing something. You donate if you have the finances to do so, right? You donate to a GoFundMe or [00:19:00] you participate in something that allows them to feel like a helper. I mentioned that before, that helper-ness. There is something that makes us feel like we are not helpless in these scenarios when we can be somebody who helps. They want, they want to call their congressman. Well, you're the one who votes, call the congressman for them. At Hanna Perkins, we talk about "doing for, doing with, standing by to admire."

It's no different when it comes to this kind of resilience. So you can do with them and be with them in their attempt to have an impact. Maybe they have a worry about their own school. Maybe they don't feel like their school is doing enough. Don't brush that off. Ask them about it. What would they like to do about it?

Do they want to have a conversation with somebody in administration? And you could go with them. OK. Right. These are things that adolescents do to make themselves feel less helpless in this world.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** So, so here's an "upset the apple cart" kind of [00:20:00] question.



**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Sure.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Not all parents have that relationship with their children

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Mm-hmm.

for one

**Bob Rosenbaum:** reason or another. So if you don't have that kind of open relationship, or if your child doesn't have reason to think that you trust them, then what do you say, how do you, how do you bring, use this as an opportunity to bring them to you?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Have a few ideas about that. One. Anytime you're talking, your child is listening. Just because they don't go, oh yes, mother, thank you. Oh yes, father, I appreciate that. They may say, "I'm fine" and storm off, but you've said it and they've heard it.

And if being a therapist for 30 years has taught me anything, it's that even a kid who's ignoring you is hearing you. And it will get in there and it will come back later. And, you know, if you're having a struggle, let, let's be really clear about this. This is a time for you as an adult to reach out to helpers, to reach out to...

maybe you don't take your kid to a therapist, but you can certainly talk to someone. There are resources [00:21:00] in every community that do crisis debriefing; that are typically free and they're, they're good at guiding families through these sorts of things. So you, as an adult, can get help with a very specific relationship by talking to a child psychologist, by talking to somebody who does crisis intervention...

There are people out there to help you navigate the relationship with your child if you feel overwhelmed and a lot of parents feel guilty. Feeling like they need to reach out. They don't want to feel like they need that help, but that's what we are here for. And we do it without judgment. Every family is different, so we can give you guidelines, but if these guidelines don't fit in with your family dynamic, then seek out the assistance of somebody in your area.

And people can certainly give Hanna Perkins a call as well, and we're happy to give advice when people need [00:22:00] it.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** OK. You've been that grief counselor who has been called in to meet with students on occasion after shootings and other kinds of traumas. What's the first thing that you say when you sit down with a student? It's a, a young person you've never met before. What do you do?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Honestly, I'm very quiet. If a kid is coming in, they're coming in usually because a parent has brought them in. What you will find, just so people know what they can





expect in these kinds of situations, if a crisis team comes in, what they usually do is they set up a space. Then parents can come in or parents can bring their children in if they feel like they want to talk to somebody.

With younger children, there's often art available and so they can draw. It's really mostly just letting kids know what I'm there for. Like I'm a, I usually say I'm a feelings doctor, that's with the younger kids; and that some scary stuff has happened and [00:23:00] I imagine that they're having a lot of big feelings and it's a lot of validating of those feelings.

And then sometimes they'll have art to do and they can do that and, and then usually it just kind of bubbles to the surface, and that's what I'm trained to take notice of is what's bubbling to the surface. And so then it becomes a very individualized experience. As part of the Ohio Crisis Response Team, there's also group debriefing and group debriefing looks a little bit different. It's much more structured. Usually those are for the "experience near" people, right.

The people who are part of the school itself, and they get a chance to talk through together. Where were you when you heard? What feelings did you have? They help you talk through the moments of shock and trauma to get a little bit of early reintegrating going, and those can be incredibly helpful. If you're invited, I highly recommend that you go if you have an event like that near you.[00:24:00]

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you think needs to be brought up in this conversation at this moment in time?

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** I think when you think about these things, you have to deal with just the, the immediate needs. Right? And then keep in mind that resources are always available.

**Bob Rosenbaum:** Thank you, Kim. Thank you. And to our audience, thank you for joining us. We hope this conversation was helpful. Hidden Language of Children Podcast is a production of nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center For Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

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