But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Special Episode: How Do You Talk to Kids About Violence In The News?

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[00:14] [Jane] This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. This is a special episode just for parents. So if you are listening with your kids, I'm going to give you a minute here to stop this podcast or skip it and go on to something else.

[00:35] We originally made this episode the day after, and in response to, a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida at the Pulse nightclub. Sadly, it's relevant all too frequently when bad news and tragedy strikes, and the news seems unavoidable. In these situations, you may be overwhelmed by your own heartbreak, fear and anxiety. And it's very difficult to know how to address what's happening, or shield the news form your children.

[01:04] Should you shelter them from the horrors you're consuming on the news? Do you sit them down and explain things? Wait for them to ask you questions? What do you do if you want to keep the news from them, but worried they may hear things that trouble them at school or on the playground?

[01:20] Dr. Robin Gurwitch is a child psychologist at the Duke University Medical Center and she has served on numerous national organizations that look at childhood trauma, including the National Advisory Committee on Children and Disasters. She's been researching and providing direct services and training on children and trauma since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. We asked her for some advice on how to broach issues like the shooting in Orlando or Sandy Hook or violence in other parts of the world with children. And we're going to play you that interview again today. For one thing, we asked her, can you shelter your children from the news, prevent them from having to deal with it at all?

[02:01] [Dr. Gurwitch] It would be wonderful if we could wrap our arms around children and prevent bad things from ever happening to them. But that, unfortunately, is not how the world works. Certainly very, very young children, 0 to 3, hopefully can be protected from images, discussions. But as they reach preschool age and upward, just turning on a television set and seeing images right away, listening to adult conversations, as much as we would like to shelter them, it's more pretending than reality. Because once I start reading and I walk into a grocery store and there's headlines I can read or there's images on the front of the newspapers or the magazines, they're right there.

By the time they're in late elementary and middle and high school, being able to turn on social media and seeing conversations or seeing pictures is there. I think it's also important, though, for parents to say, you know what? There's an off button. There's things I can do to limit exposure.

[03:11] So, for very young children, making sure they see very little or none at all. As children get older and they're going to see a little, make sure that's limited as much as possible. And as children begin to watch it, when they reach the stage that they can seek it out themselves, so, they're having conversations or they're watching it a little bit more, please, sit down with them. Don't have them watch it alone and then turn it off and talk about what do you think about what you just heard or what you just saw or what you saw on social media.
And let's talk about that. So, I think it's important to always be able to circle back around so that children know that you're there for them.

[00:03:52] [Jane] But should you let them direct the conversation? I mean, if you..you don't want to avoid the topic. But when you talk to your children about something like this, do you just say your piece or do you ask them questions before you, you know, to elicit what your responses might be?

[00:04:10] [Dr. Gurwitch] If you are aware that they know about it, then you can begin the conversation with "I know you've heard, you've seen pictures about _____. So, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about that." So, you're right there saying "I'm willing to talk about it."

If you are not sure, but it's likely they will hear about it or see pictures of it, then you can sit them down and say, "There was a horrible thing that happened. And I wanted to talk to you about that." We might even ask, "What have you heard about what happened?" Because that way you hear from them. What do they understand? And then any misperceptions or misinformation can be laid to rest or corrected. Encouraging questions are really important. So, it really is, depending on what, you know, their exposure may have been.

But if they have friends, if they are, you know, 8, 9, 10, 11, and they're going to play at somebody's house and assume that that family is not gonna have television on or not going to be discussing it or there's not gonna be any pictures, I think that's taking a risk. And so, if I can be in front of that, I think my child learns, "I can talk to mom or dad or grandma, whoever my caregiver is, about anything."

[05:41] I think starting the conversation is the hardest thing parents ever do. But not talking about it can actually make things worse. Because I start filling in the gaps, as a child. I hear a little bit. I may not understand it. So, I'm going to fill it in. And what I fill in the gaps with is generally much worse than what the reality is.

[06:01] [Jane] in some of these situations, the reality of what happened is pretty horrific. So, what's the right amount of
information to give kids?

[00:06:08] [Dr. Gurwitch] I liken it to when children ask us where babies come from. If my child is 5 years old and asks me where babies come from, I'm going to have a very different conversation with her than I am when my child is 11 and when my child is 16. I'm still going to have the conversation, but it's going to change based on age. So, I think that's important to keep in mind. What, what can they understand? I don't think that it is necessary for children to have all the horrible, gruesome, grisly details. I don't think that that's useful for anyone to have.

[00:06:42] [Jane] How do you have that conversation, though, if you yourself as a parent start to feel like, "I'm not sure my child is safe"?

[00:06:49] [Dr. Gurwitch] It does give us pause because we can't say, "100 percent, I promise this will never, ever happen." Because we're not clairvoyant. We can't, we can't know that, but what we can say is "I am doing everything I know how to do to make sure that you are safe. I'm making sure that I'm doing everything I know how to do to make sure that I'm going to be here with you for as long as I can to bother you," right?

That's what I tell my, my daughter when she was growing up:
"I'm going to try and live a very long life, so I can make sure that I'll be there for you, and I'm going bother you for a long, long time."

[07:32] But I think it is important to help families understand, yes, as parents, we may have those worries. But I think for our children, we need to give the message that, "I am going to make sure that that we as a family and me as your caregiver, are doing what I can do to keep us safe."

And if you are worried, if you're concerned, talk to somebody else, i.e. another adult. Talk to a friend, talk to a family member, talk to a member of your, of your faith, talk to a mental health professional. Find a psychologist in your area if it's becoming overwhelming for you. But I think it is really important for children to see that, as a role model, my mom, my dad, my caregiver are OK. Does that mean that they can't see you get upset or cry? Did we all share shed tears after Sandy Hook? Did we get upset and maybe cry when we saw this recent tragedy?

It's not that children never see us cry or never see us upset, the point is, do they see us pull ourselves back together again?

[08:45] [Jane] I'm glad you mentioned that, because it certainly makes me emotional as a parent to try to think about having that kind of conversation in the face of what does feel scary to me. You know what feels like I don't know what the future holds for me and for my children in whatever realm. And so, things like this just bring up the fact that we don't know what's

going to happen. And it is hard to think about not being able to cry in front of my children, for example.

[09:10] [Dr. Gurwitch] I think it's, if you do feel yourself crying, if you do feel yourself tearing up, to say, “When I think about this, it makes me sad. When I think about this, it makes me a little scared. So if that is how you're feeling, too, that's okay, because I'm here to talk about it. And when we share those feelings, we feel better. When we try to hold it inside and pretend that those feelings aren't there, that's when those
feelings can swamp us. They can become too much for us.”

[09:49] [Jane] Dr. Gurwitch, for children who have personally experienced tragedy or trauma or war, what kind of special care do they need when you start talking about events that are in the world that may not affect them personally, but have the possibility of
triggering things that are really difficult for them in their own lives?

[10:09] [Dr. Gurwitch] Children that have experienced their own traumatic events or losses, events will bring those back up. That's pretty common. And if you know, for example, that maybe they had a recent loss, maybe they, it may not have been violent. Maybe grandmother died after a long illness, or maybe they did have a loss that was more violent, to be able to say, “You know, when I heard about this, it made me think about that.” And acknowledge that relationship and acknowledge that it makes me think about that. “And,
and we were able to get through that really hard thing together and we're going to move through this together.”

And I think for parents to begin to look at what kind of stress reactions their child may be showing to monitor, are they are they having a harder time sleeping? Are they thinking about this all the time and telling you, “I can't get it out of my mind”? Do you notice changes in their appetite or their activities that they used to enjoy? “Now, I don't want to ever leave your side. So, I'm not going to play soccer. I'm not going to my friend's house.” So do you notice those kinds of changes?

I think also when children are stressed, their focus and attention and concentration are little bit--It happens to adults, too--it gets a little bit out of kilter. So I may I may truly have forgotten about my chores. It's not that I'm doing it on purpose, but when I'm stressed, I forget those kinds of things. Or I might not do them as well as I did before. I may be more irritable or pick fights with my siblings. I know it's a shocker! But that that may happen too, or my teenager may be a little bit more moody, above and beyond what we would expect in that pre-teen teenage years.

[12:09] [Jane] And then what do you do? Do you just ride it out, or do you seek help?

[Dr. Gurwitch] Well, I think that's a good a good question that parents often wrestle with: How do we handle the reactions we see? I think when we're seeing stress reactions, it's important to, first of all, help children know that what they may be experiencing is pretty common.

So if, for example, like you mentioned, a child that's had a trauma or have, or has just had a grief event occur to let them know that it would be normal to have some of those same kinds of feelings that they had before. “And let's think about what we did before: we took long walks, we rode our bikes, we talked about it. We practiced some relaxation together.”

So helping children get in touch with what kinds of things they used to cope with in the past that were successful can be really helpful at times like this when children may be overwhelmed.

[13:15] [Jane] You know, some of the research suggests that giving kids who have experienced trauma or who are feeling things that, you know, maybe this isn't personal to them, but they're still feeling some of the effects of a national discussion about something so violent, that giving children something to do in a way to channel that energy is really helpful to them. Do you have suggestions for what parents could do with their kids?

[13:39] [Dr. Gurwitch] Sure! I think when children feel like they can help someone else, they actually help themselves. So, if children are feeling like they want to make a difference, they want to help, there are so many things that families can do together. It may be making a donation. So maybe that 12-year-old that got their Red Cross babysitter certificate, and they take a little bit of the money they earn babysitting and make a donation. It may be that I draw a card to send to the first responders.

So helping children think: what would they like to do? And it's amazing what kids may come up with. And it may be just something simple, saying I want to help somebody and they have an elderly neighbor, and for the next month, I'm going to help her take her trash cans down to the curb for the trash pickup. When we figure out a way that we can, can go out to help others, that's beneficial.

I think the bottom line is that this is hard for all of us, children included.
And one of the best, most important things we can do is to be a little patient, to give that little bit of extra support right now, a little bit of that extra attention and a little bit of extra help and love for children that may need more, there are resources. Finding mental health, professional psychologists in your area, talking to someone from your faith community, there are those resources. And we know that there are phenomenal treatments for children that may need more to help them through these difficult times.

[00:15:16] [Jane] Dr. Robin Gurwitch is a child psychologist at the Duke University Medical Center and she has served on numerous national committees that look at childhood trauma, including the National Advisory Committee on Children and Disasters. She spoke with us in June of 2016, after the shootings at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando and we are re-airing her interview now as so many people struggle with the news of another deadly mass shooting.

Thank you so much for listening to this special episode. Let us know what you think, what your kids are thinking. Send your comments to questions@butwhykids.org and if your kids have

more they want us to talk about, for them, let us know. We'll be back soon with a regular episode. I hope you'll listen. Music this episode is from Kai Engel.
But Why is produced by me, Jane Lindholm, and by Melody Bodette at Vermont Public Radio.

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