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# CULTIVATING CALM

Helping kids feel secure and empowered in today's stressful world

BY LAURA PETRECCA

**O**n Dec. 14, 2012, when Tricia Kenney heard about the deadly school shooting in Newtown, Conn., she thought strategically about how to break the news to her daughters, then 8 and 11. The attack happened about an hour's drive from Kenney's community in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. Her oldest daughter

had an event at school the next morning, and Kenney decided to tell her afterward so she wouldn't be afraid to attend.

Yet, when Kenney began the complex conversation, she was in for a surprise: "She already knew ... she heard about it from a friend."

Her daughters didn't have social media accounts, so Kenney presumed she was "the keeper >



of the information they would receive,” she says. “That was a bit of a wake-up call.”

Kenney now communicates faster and more frequently on sensitive topics such as shootings and school lockdowns. She reassures her daughters of their safety and reminds them to be aware of their surroundings. “If you don’t make it scary, if you make it smart, it becomes empowering instead of fearful,” she notes. “My overriding philosophy is you can’t live life in fear.”

Like millions across the nation, Kenney is parenting in a time when news of mass shootings, bombings, natural disasters and other tragic events can quickly reach kids via TV, text messages, word of mouth and social media.

Chromebook- and iPad-toting children “have access to the news instantaneously,” says Rockville, Md.-based psychologist Mary Alvord. “Everybody is more aware of these bad things that happen because we have social media.”

And, as Kenney learned, even kids without social media accounts can hear scary-sounding reports. Yet in a world of unexpected events and rapid-pace communications, parents and kids can still feel a sense of power and control, says Alvord, co-author of the book *Resilience Builder Program for Children and Adolescents: Enhancing Social Competence and Self-Regulation*.

Here’s how to get there:

#### FOSTER EVERYDAY FRANK CONVERSATION

Centennial, Colo.-based psychologist Natalie Vona asks her four kids open-ended questions, such as how their day went, whether they saw any mean-spirited behavior and whether anything worried them. “It’s part of the normal conversation where you just talk about how you felt that day,” she says.

But when discussing their fears, she probes for specifics. “You

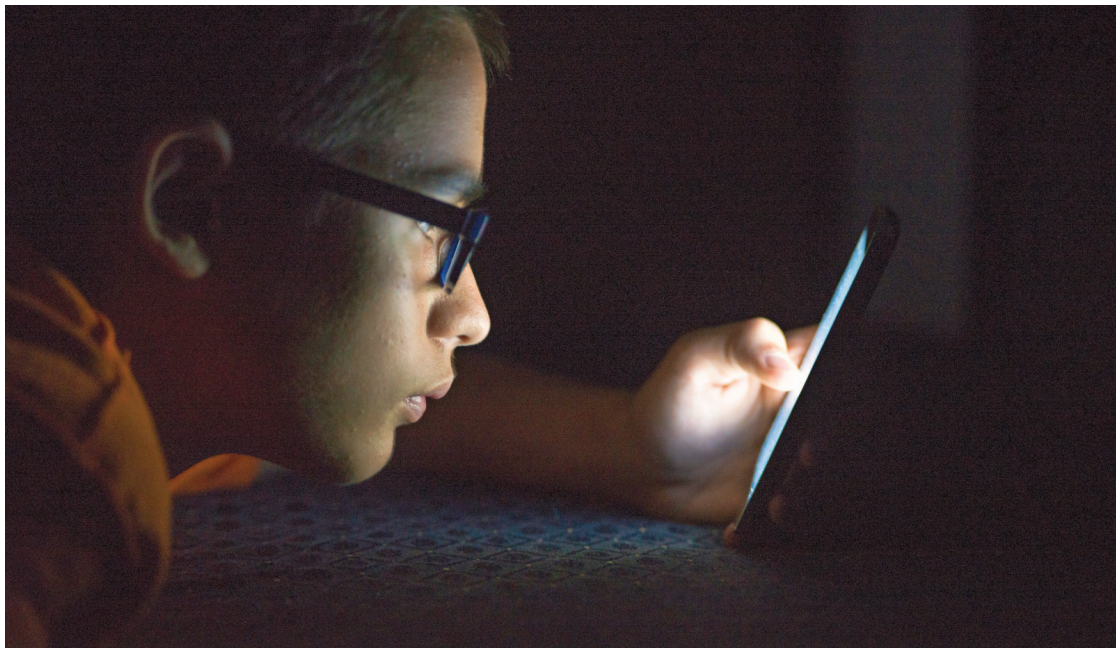
have to ask what they are afraid of because your fears aren’t their fears,” explains Vona. “We never really know unless we ask them what they are worried about.”

She makes each conversation age-appropriate for her children, who range from 7 to 14. If a talk with her oldest child gets too mature for the other kids to hear, Vona will redirect and follow-up later in a one-on-one conversation. “Her questions as a 14-year-old going into high school are going to be so different than my 7-year-old,” Vona says.

#### COMMUNICATE WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

To believe that kids won’t hear about tragic events “is wishful thinking,” says Robin Gurwitch, a professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University School of Medicine who specializes in supporting children after trauma.

Any school-age child can be exposed to shocking news while on the school bus, via teachers



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— MARY ALVORD, Psychologist

talking in the halls and through the media, she says. Parents should ask their children what they know about the situation, then tailor the conversation from there. If a parent doesn't bring it up, a child may be afraid to talk about it, and can potentially obtain misinformation.

Gurwitch recommends that parents say, “This is a really hard topic, but there is nothing that you and I can't talk about.” In turn, “that openness can lead to other conversations about things that affect a child, such as peer pressure, bullying, sex or even devastation about not being invited to someone's party,” she says.

After the discussion, “circle back around — it's not a one and done,” she says. “Tell your kids, ‘I'm going to check back in with you and if you have any questions between our check-in, let me know.’”

#### BE HONEST

It's also important to have an honest conversation at “a developmentally appropriate >



level,” Alvord says. Parents shouldn’t lie to protect kids or promise that nothing bad will ever happen to them, she explains. Instead they should talk through how it’s possible to be resilient when faced with adversity.

Tell them they “can’t control everything but ... they can control certain aspects of what is happening,” Alvord says. Remind them of safety plans, and let them know that if Plan A doesn’t work, there’s a Plan B.

If a parent is stumped by a child’s questions, it’s fine to say so. “We don’t want to give kids the feeling that we know all the answers — we don’t,” she notes. Parents can tell a child that he or she asked “a really good question” and say they will do some research and follow up.

#### PROMOTE A SENSE OF SECURITY

Reassure children that everybody is concerned about their safety and security, says Gurwitch. “Let kids know that school facilities, first responders and others are doing all they can to keep them safe.”

Rebecca Sullivan, a parent in Boston, says she tells her three kids that she and others — such as the school secretary — are watching out for them: “I tell them they are safe, and I honestly believe it.”

Sree Mukherjee Vaid, who lives in Old Greenwich, Conn., says her two kids appear to have inherited her stance of “it’s nothing until it’s really something.” “I don’t walk around with

a sense of impending doom ever,” she says. And in turn, “I sense that my kids are not very fearful.”

A parent’s actions have tremendous sway, says Jonathan Comer, director of the Mental Health Interventions and Technology Program at Florida International University. It’s vitally important for adults to monitor their stress levels, and ratchet it down when it rises. “Kids take cues from the adults in their lives,” he says. “Anxious kids often have anxious parents.”

#### SHARE COPING SKILLS

Tell kids about the calming techniques you use, such as deep breathing or muscle relaxation, says Alvord. “Problem-solve out loud,” she says.

Vona lets her kids know when she’s sad, yet also describes her steps to feel better, such as calling a friend or exercising. “I



acknowledge my feelings and then say, 'there are things you do to help yourself,'" she says.

And if you cry in front of a child, show how you calm down, says Gurwitch. If a child sees an upset parent disappear into a bedroom, only to miraculously reappear looking composed, it can be confusing, she says.

### EXPLAIN PROBABILITIES

Kids need to understand that many of the events on the news are uncommon occurrences, says Comer. "The news media tends to portray a world that is more dangerous than the actual viewer inhabits," he says. "The media doesn't report that millions of families had a nice dinner tonight and told each other that they love each other and went to bed happy. They report the outliers."

Comer also suggests parents turn off the TV during times of tragic events because the images "can be unnecessarily traumatic," he says.

### ENCOURAGE ACTION

A little more than a month after the Feb. 14 school shooting in Parkland, Fla., Vaid and her 13-year-old daughter, Richa, joined the March for Our Lives protests in New York. "You have to stand up for what you believe in," she says.

Liz Gumbinner, a parent of two daughters in Brooklyn, N.Y., also encourages her 10- and 12-year-old to be proactive. As a family, they've researched and donated to GoFundMe causes, such as a campaign that benefited victims of the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Florida. The girls have also walked in protest marches and joined bake sales that contribute to relief organizations. "It's so important psychologically for kids to feel empowered," Gumbinner says. And now that they are active, "they're the ones who often tell me about things that are going on in the school or the community." ■



## SCHOOL SAFETY ASSIGNMENT

Learn the safety plan at your child's school, advises Gregory A. Thomas, a public safety expert and former president of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives. From 1997 to 2003, he worked with New York City schools to develop safety and security plans, and says most parents got a failing grade for safety class attendance. Often, just a handful would show up at his sessions.

Yet, those who learn about fire and lockdown drills, as well as other safety procedures, gain "a foundation of preparedness," he says. That can foster peace of mind for parents and children.

It can also reduce chaos if an emergency occurs, he says. For instance, panicked parents who race to a school can cause gridlock and inadvertently block first-responder vehicles from getting through.

Thomas' other counsel: Trust the school to do due diligence with safety procedures. "You won't have a teacher who went to school for early childhood education putting together a safety plan by themselves. There will be some outside help from the fire department, police department and emergency management," he says.

## WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS

"Some anxiety is normal," notes psychologist Mary Alvord. That feeling can propel a child to study for a test or not get too close to a cliff's edge.

Yet when a child begins to worry intensely and frequently, or if there is a major habit change — such as sleeping issues, skipping class, not turning in homework and withdrawing from friends and family — it may be time to seek professional support.

These websites can provide guidance:

- **American Academy of Pediatrics:** [aap.org](http://aap.org)
  - **Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology:** [sccap53.org](http://sccap53.org)
  - **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** [nctsn.org](http://nctsn.org)
- Alvord also recommends these books for age-appropriate tips on handling your child's anxiety:
- **Ages 6 to 12:** *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety* by Dawn Huebner
  - **Ages 9 to 13:** *Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid's Guide to Managing Anxiety* by Dawn Huebner
  - **Ages 8 to 14:** *Anxiety-Free Kids: An Interactive Guide for Parents and Children* by Bonnie Zucker
  - **Teens:** *Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens: A Workbook to Break the Nine Thought Habits That Are Holding You Back* by Mary Alvord and Anne McGrath