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about mass shootings 4-minute read

**OPINION** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.* 

Nashville. East Lansing. Uvalde.

Buffalo. How to talk to your child

## **Bert Mandelbaum** Special to the USA TODAY Network Published 4:05 a.m. ET March 29, 2023 | Updated 3:17 p.m. ET March 29, 2023

News



definition, more than 130 mass shooting incidents in the U.S. have taken place this year. Some 404 children and adolescents had been killed by guns as of March 28, according to the Gun Violence Archive. Last year, 647 mass shootings took place in the U.S. — that's almost two per day.

event in which four or more people are killed or injured by guns. According to this

world. The unthinkable has become normal. Our job as parents is to help our children feel safe. Children and adolescents need to feel secure and protected in order to thrive. How should we talk with young people about these events in a way that acknowledges reality and also helps our children to feel safe? ELIERGENCY EXII

A child weeps while on the bus leaving, The Covenant School, following a mass shooting a the school Monday morning in Nashville, Tenn., Monday, March 27, 2023. Three students and three adults were killed. The shooter was killed by police on the scene. Students were transported from Covenant School to a reunification center at Woodmont Baptist Church. Nicole Hester/The Tennessean States in the Northeast have some of the strictest firearm laws in the country and one of the lowest rates of gun violence of any state, but mass shootings have occurred here as well. And in the context of broad media coverage, mass shootings that occur in East Lansing, Michigan or Uvalde, Texas feel very present to all of us.

These tragedies impact our sense of the safety of our families, and children and

adolescents are very aware of this feeling of danger. As parents, we need to be

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prepared to discuss these issues with our children.

— asking and listening is the important part.

When a child comes to you with concerns about a mass shooting, parents can begin to respond by asking what they know and what they are feeling, reassuring the child that they are safe and listening to their questions. ■ Ask your child what they have heard about the incident so far. What are other students saying? How are teachers explaining this? Get a baseline understanding of what your child knows so you can explain further and

- perfect thing to say either you can adjust and update what you say over time. More perspective: Four hours at Michigan State: Terror, trauma and the power of community Three approaches for different ages

A fathers comforts his daughter as they visit the makeshift memorial at the entrance to the Covenant School Tuesday, March 28, 2023, in Nashville, Tenn. Three children and three school staff members were killed by a former student in

As children grow, their improving maturity will allow them to understand more

but these general guidelines will fit different stages of life.

specifics and think about bigger questions. Every parent will know their child best,

■ For kids under 6, parents should focus on creating a safe place to help children

understand that their feelings are valid and know it's OK to talk about feelings.

Kids need to know they can talk about scary topics with their parents in a calm

and safe manner. For young children, simple and factual explanations work

■ Once children reach 11 or so, they are still identifying and learning about their

feelings, but may also be getting exposure to graphic details from social media

or nonstop TV coverage. Following 9/11, children would sometimes ask days

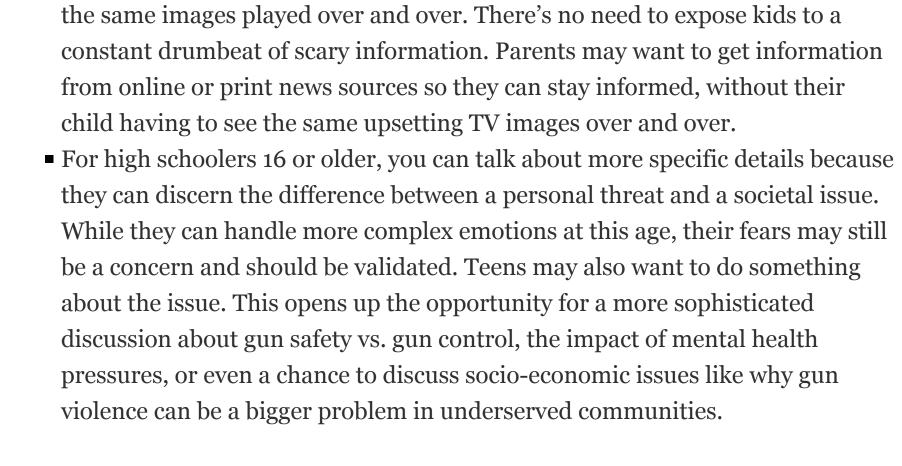
later if there were still more planes crashing into buildings, because they saw

Monday's mass shooting. Mark Zaleski / The Tennessean

best, without going into details.

When to seek help

+O1 counting



Parents often ask how to know when their children's level of anxiety is bad enough to seek help from a school counselor, pediatrician or therapist. In this case, look at how these feelings are impacting their ability to live a full, healthy life. If a child's fears have reached the point where their schoolwork is suffering, they're having problems sleeping or their behavior has changed dramatically, it's time to seek professional help. Advertisement

Most parents discuss mental health concerns with their child's pediatrician at first.

patients. Fortunately, telehealth providers such as Fort Health have begun to fill

these gaps and have become excellent partners in providing these services, as they

work closely with many pediatric practices and major health plans across the state

More perspective: How many more students and teachers must die before

However, <u>65% of pediatricians</u> report difficulties finding referrals for their

to increase access to quality of care.

lawmakers act to stop gun violence?

Stay calm and keep listening

Monday's mass shooting. Mark Zaleski / The Tennessean

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Mind Institute.

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Demonstrators protest against gun violence in front of the Cordell Hull Building Tuesday, March 28, 2023, in Nashville,

Tenn., after mass shooting Monday at Covenant School. Mark Zaleski / The Tennessean

NOT UP TO THE JOB

56%

A girl holds her mother's hand as they walk to the makeshift memorial at the entrance to the Covenant School Tuesday, March 28, 2023, in Nashville, Tenn. Three children and three school staff members were killed by a former student in

There's one more piece of advice I'd like to share with parents. Please remember

that teaching your children to stay calm starts with you. Children pay attention to

how you react and model that behavior. If a parent can stay open while listening to

their concerns, this will give kids the space they need to manage their feelings. This

isn't easy. If parents and caregivers need a resource on how to strengthen these

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skills, they can look at free educational information like resources from the Child

help your child build resilience and manage these feelings. But we need to consider this as a public health issue and work together to fix the problems at the source. We need to find solutions to the rising mental health issues impacting our teens and young adults and to implement commonsense measures to ensure that gun ownership is as safe as possible. We can do this as a society if we work together and remember that our first priority should be to create a better world for our children. Bert Mandelbaum, M.D. FAAP, is chair of the Department of Pediatrics for Penn Medicine Princeton Health and chairs the New Jersey Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Task Force on Adolescent Sleep and School Start Time.

The extraordinary frequency of these horrific events means that all of us, including our children, have come to experience mass shootings as an expected part of our

We're always working to improve your experience. Let us know what

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you think.

Advertisement address any misconceptions. You don't need to share specific details right away Help your child understand that their feelings are real and valid, and that it's OK to feel scared, anxious or sad. Remind them that you, their teachers and school administrators have taken concrete steps to keep them safe. For kids, everything can feel like it will happen to them — that's normal for their age. If you help explain how active shooter drills and metal detectors are similar to fire drills or the safety briefing on an airplane, they'll understand how this information is important, but most likely, something they'll never need to use. ■ Finally, allow your child to ask any questions they want, and come back with more in the future. Don't promise that a shooting will never happen to them, but explain how the real risk is extremely low. You don't need to think of the

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The best way to support our children's physical and mental health in the long term will be to create an America where they feel safe and cared for in any situation, without worrying about mass shootings. There are important steps you can take to

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