

Talking to Children about Hate Crimes and Anti-Semitism

The recent hate crime and aftermath at the Tree of Life congregation synagogue in the Pittsburgh area on International Religious Freedom Day is a sad reminder of the painful consequences of anti-Semitism, racism, and hatred. It is common for people to experience fear, anxiety, worry, confusion, and anger when learning about this event. Some may even experience thoughts that the world is no longer safe and struggle to make sense of what happened. Children may also experience strong reactions and will turn to trusted adults for help and guidance. To help children, here are some strategies for how to talk with them about what happened.

Discuss the Shooting

- **Start the conversation.** Talk about the events with your children/teens. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening. Before you sit down with your children, you may need some time to talk with other adults to process for yourself what you are hearing and to address your own reactions. With traditional and social media, it is highly unlikely that teenagers have not heard about the shooting at the synagogue, anti-Semitic and racist remarks, and responses from various leaders. Provide a level of information and discussion that is appropriate for your child's developmental level. *NOTE: For young children (preschool and below), they may not understand parts of the discussions.*
- **What does your child already know?** Start by asking what your children/teens have already heard about the shooting and the aftermath. As your children talk, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information could change in the days ahead.
 - *For preschool children:* Consider what they have seen or heard. Do not assume that they do not sense your emotions or have not heard your conversations. Be mindful of exposing them to adult conversations. As noted above, listen, clarify, and address misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears or concerns.
- **Gently correct inaccurate information.** Take time to provide the correct information in language your children/teens can understand. Teens may also want to talk about situations where they have experienced or witnessed anti-Semitism, discrimination or hate. Help address any safety concerns that they may bring up.
- **Encourage your children/teens to ask questions and answer questions directly.** They may have some difficult questions about the recent events or similar experiences they may have had. For example, they may ask if it is possible that such a shooting could happen to your congregation, to your community; they are probably really asking whether it is "likely." It is important to discuss the reasonable likelihood of this risk. They are also asking if they

are safe. This may be a good time to review plans your family has of assuring safety in the event of *any* crisis situation, as well as plans in place at school. Include in your answers any information you may have on efforts being made to assure safety (e.g., working with local responders, with experts in safety, and with Jewish community leadership and teachers. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation if they feel they have the information that they need to be safe.

- **Understand common reactions.** Children/teens may have different reactions to these events. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, problems with attention and concentration may arise. Increases in irritability and defiance may be present. Children and even teens may have more difficulty separating from parents, wanting to stay at home or with other caregivers. Worries and anxieties about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how this will affect their lives are common. As this event and other hate crimes are discussed across our country, children/teens who were not directly affected may have anxieties that “it could have happened to me.” Sleep and appetite may also be affected. In general, these reactions will begin to lessen within a few weeks of events. Support from you will help with feelings of safety and security.
- **Limit adult conversations.** Be mindful that children/teens are sensitive to your stress. Know that they also listen to your conversations, even when you don’t believe they can hear or are attending to you. Children may not understand all of your conversations and will fill in the blanks, often with misconceptions or inaccurate information. While the recent events have raised concerns for adults, have discussions about your feelings and thoughts with other adults out of your child’s or teen’s presence.
- **Limit media exposure.** For the very young children, there is truly no “good” amount. For older children and teens, they will likely have contact with traditional and social media. The younger the child, the less the exposure to media there should be. In all cases, find time to sit with your children/teens and ask about what they have seen, and what they have heard. Get their ideas and opinions, and check-in to understand what their friends may be saying about what is happening. Consider limiting your own exposure to media. Too much increases our stress levels also.
- **Be patient.** In times of stress, children/teens may have more trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. Even if they may not openly seek your understanding or support, they will want this. With adolescents who are searching for an increased sense of independence, it may be more difficult for them to ask for support and help. Children/teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself too!)
- **Extra help.** Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children’s/teens’ abilities to function at school, home or with friends, contact your Rabbi or your local mental health professionals who have expertise in discussing trauma and bereavement. Your family physician or pediatrician may be able to guide you to such experts. State mental health associations can also provide guidance.

Discuss Anti-Semitism

- **Answer questions directly.** Anti-Semitism is difficult for adults to understand. No one wants to have to have a discussion with their children that people dislike them just for being Jewish or attending a Jewish place of worship or community center. However, given recent events and a rise in anti-Semitic comments, discussing this lets your children know that you are willing to talk about difficult topics with them. Sometimes, the answer may be: “I don’t understand fully why some people don’t like us/our Jewish friends, but it is never OK to say hurtful things to others.” Help children and teens come up with a response should anyone say or do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Help them identify adults whom they can trust should something be said or done when you are not around. There are many children’s books for different ages that are available related to anti-Semitism. Consider reading one with your children or providing one to your teens. Discuss the book after it is read as a way to jump-start a conversation about a challenging topic.
- **Empower your children and teens.** When discussing anti-Semitism, identify other adults who your children and teens can trust should they be worried or overwhelmed by emotions and need someone with whom to talk. You are also identifying trusted adults to approach if they or someone they know or see is being victimized by bullying. Here are suggested ways to start the conversation:
 - **For preschool children:** “Sometimes people can say things that are mean and hurt our feelings. Some people may say these things to us just because we are Jewish. We are very proud to be Jewish. If someone ever tries to be hurtful to you because you are Jewish, it is important for you to tell me and to tell your teacher. I will do everything I can to make sure that you safe. That is your teacher’s job, too. No one ever should be bullied or made to feel bad because of who they are, what they look like, or what they believe. Have you heard about anything like this or has someone ever said or done anything like this to you?”
 - **For older children and teens:** Discuss these events with a historical perspective, for example, World War II, the civil rights movement, etc. Emphasize that at all times, there were also good people that took a stand.
 - **For college students:** As your college students may be away from home, they (and you) may be concerned about how recent events may be played out on college campuses. These may take the form of protests, rallies, and student organizations being formed. Existing organizations such as Hillel may also be planning activities or special events. Talk to your college students about safety and security on campus. Identify where to find information and who are trusted organizations and individuals. Discuss their thoughts about involvement. Stress the important need to say something should they or anyone they know or see be the victim of hate speech or actions.
- **Promote your family values and beliefs.** As you begin conversations, recognize that this is an important opportunity to instill values and beliefs about respect, tolerance, and diversity.

What your children/teens hear and see from you, they learn. And these lessons can become their values and beliefs.

- ***Recognition of other groups:*** When talking to your children and teens about your values and beliefs, help them identify other groups who may be targeted for hate and discrimination. These include minorities, other religious groups, refugees, and LGBTQ individuals. These children/teens may also be scared, worried, anxious, and angry. Consider how you would like your children/teens to support others who may be targeted by racism, hate speech, and actions.
- **Be a positive role model.** Consider sharing your feelings about the events with your children/teens at a level they can understand. You may express worry, fear, and some anger over what happened and for what others are saying. You may express sadness, worry, and empathy. But, it is very important for you to also share with your children/teens ideas for coping with difficult situations like talking with you or other trusted adults. Your positive statements about the response by many leaders, Rabbis, and others in support of those targeted by hatred will increase your children's sense of security and safety.
- **Keep in mind:**
 - ***School can be a place of safety or bullying.*** School/college is a place of learning, time with friends, and time for school spirit and activities. But these settings may also bring other worries related to violence. Sadly, hate and bullying behaviors are on the rise. Recent events may heighten worries and anxieties as they go to school/college. Be sure to discuss with your children, teens, and college student what to do should they encounter such behavior toward *anyone at all*: Tell someone. You may discuss other action steps such as befriending those who may be targeted.
 - ***Religious services will be addressing this hate crime.*** With regular religious services, it is likely that all of us will be thinking of this hate crime and those who were killed and injured. These issues will likely be part of conversations and sermons. Prepare your children before services.
 - ***Enhanced security.*** Synagogues and temples may increase security during worship services and even Sunday school. Talk to your children and teens about these efforts to promote safety. Be sure they know that these individuals are there to protect congregants as well as to provide any help needed. This discussion may help to reduce the anxiety surrounding religious activities. If your children attend Jewish schools or attend activities at Jewish community centers, learn about efforts to ensure safety and security in these settings. If your children ever feel uncomfortable about their safety, be sure that they know that you are available to talk and address these concerns.