

How to speak with young people about the Bondi stabbings

The horrific events that unfolded at the Bondi Junction Westfield shopping centre over the weekend, and again overnight at the Good Shepherd Church, Wakerley, have been at saturation level on mainstream and social media. Many report feeling traumatised and unsure from witnessing the vision that has been looping in conjunction with the commentary on the tragic loss of life and the heroic efforts that saw this come to an end so dramatically.

At [SchoolAid](#) with the active support of APPA, we work to reduce the incidence of youth anxiety, depression, and suicide by focussing on philanthropy, kindness, and gratitude.

We know that fixating on the problems of life usually magnifies them.

Parents, teachers and principals will likely have many young people feeling anxious as a result of the media they have consumed around the Bondi tragedy, and we hope this resource will be helpful as you discuss the situation honestly in age-appropriate ways.

We asked psychologist (and ex-teacher) Michael Hawton, to share some tips to add confidence to the process for you. Please feel free to share this with any others who may need the insights to best assist their children or students at this time.



Three tips for helping children deal with the Bondi tragedy.

Children will become more anxious not because they are inherently anxious but because of the interactions they have with the adults in their environment.

A first thing to say is that adults and children process stress differently.

Children are more likely to be affected by images they see and to feel some fear in their bodies.

We need to recognise that we as adults have the fully-adult, psychological minds and that we are able to plan, reason and organise our thoughts better than our children who do not yet have fully developed minds.

The recent news of a mass stabbing event in Sydney will land heavy on our hearts but **as adults we will make sense of this by seeing things in perspective**. Distressing as it is, we also know that we will be okay, and that life will go on.

Children have not yet developed this level of perspective in the moment.

It's our responsibility to take steps to limit their exposure to these events. I am not saying that these events should not cause us all significant concern. But the question is how much should we expose children – who only have a limited ability to control these events as individuals – to the saturation coverage given during these crises, and their aftermath.

As children hear more and more about distressing things, this repetitive 'hearing' or 'viewing' can accumulate anxiousness in their minds. Anxiety builds, in other words.

So, **my first tip** is: **Once you've seen or heard a frightening world event,**

- Don't keep watching it over and over.
- Turn the TV off or turn the radio to another station.
- Try to minimize your exposure and that of your family to the news of these events.
- If you do need news updates, then maybe read about it privately online.

Be especially aware that images seen on television (or video footage on online media platforms) have a particularly powerful effect on children, especially very young children.

For teachers, don't feel as if you should 'process' the events in class lessons. Recent research shows that, with individuals who have experienced or witnessed something distressing (a bank robbery or an event like the one in Sydney), that the people who do not go through 'critical incident debriefing' do better in recovery terms than those who do.

There's something about us being able to put things 'away' in our minds for a period of time while we integrate these memories. Most people do this when they wonder about things or when they try to make sense of things over time.

Second Tip: Try to minimize your children's exposure to the news of these events.

If they say they are worried about what they have seen, **my second tip** is try and hear their feelings before moving on to another topic.

By all means, you can listen to them by simply acknowledging what you believe they might be experiencing. "I'm hearing that this was upsetting for you... or 'So, seeing those people made you feel pretty worried that it could happen here?'

Then, give them a clear and accurate rationale for understanding that these events (and ones like them) are both very rare - and unlikely to repeat again any time soon.

Say something like, "We will get through this time - and we will go on with our lives. That's not to say that this wasn't a horrible thing to happen to these people, but you will be ok."

Third tip. Help your children get things in proportion.

In Australia and New Zealand, we live in very safe societies. Without being Pollyanna about it, children need to be reminded that the news – particularly overseas news – represents only a tiny, small slice of what is going on in the world. For better or worse, the news tends to focus on the destructive, frightening and violent events which makes the news, well - news!

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By Michael Hawton, psychologist and founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*.

You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

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