

# How to Talk to Children about

# THE NEWS

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# Introduction

“How do I talk to my child about...?” This is not an uncommon question among parents as well as teachers and catechists. Abstract concepts, hard-to-broach subjects, and sensitive issues all require a particular kind of language that gives a child enough information without being overly complex or confusing. The same is true for many aspects of our faith.

This series of books provides parents as well as teachers and catechists with a range of questions about these topics. Each one offers terminology relatable to a young child’s experience as well as family activities to stimulate further conversation and comprehension. In sharing these responses, you are likely to find yourself more than capable of talking to your child about these and other topics of faith and practice.

# Tragedies, disasters, and news reporting of them

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## **For your information**

The news exists to provide information about what's happening in our communities and in the larger world. While reputable news agencies do not try to scare viewers or sensationalize a story, some news programmers know that people are more likely to pay attention if the news is bad, shocking, or titillating, so such stories get more air time than positive stories.

News stories can be frightening or shocking in and of themselves. If it is difficult for many adults to resist such stories and not become frightened, it is even truer for children who often have difficulty separating fact from fantasy; who trust that “if it’s on TV, it must be true”; who tend to believe what they see, hear, or read; and whose personal experiences are limited. They might believe that an event that they see on the news is happening in their neighborhood or city, when it is really far away. They are especially frightened by news that describes the death or injury of children. Today’s children hear news stories from television, the Internet, radio, and word-of-mouth (e.g., their friends are talking about a story), so parents cannot depend solely on their own efforts to keep children away from “bad” news.

## **Talking to children about the news**

- Remind children that it is common for people to pay more attention to bad news or a sensational story than good news. That is why news programs feature “bad” news to attract more people to their programs, websites, or articles. But that does not mean good news is not happening.

- To allay unrealistic fears, reassure children that faraway events are not close to them or their homes and that they are safe.
- Emphasize that God created a good world (Genesis 1), but that many things happen that God does not favor or intend (e.g., murders). Human beings do many things that God doesn't want them to do. Our faith teaches us that God does not want us to suffer or be sad, and that we can turn to God when we are anxious, fearful, and sad.
- Reassure children that God loves them, and you do too. They cannot hear this enough, especially in the midst of bad news. Remind them that, because of your love, you will always do your best to keep them safe.
- Strongly—but gently—give the message that your children can ask you any questions about what they hear on the news, and you will answer as honestly as you can; you will not consider questions silly. If you don't know how to answer a question, it's fine to say, "I really don't know," or "I hadn't thought of that before. How can we find the answer to your question?" It's also good to follow up on a child's question by saying, "What do you think is going on?" or "What do you think would be a better way of handling [the situation]?"
- By encouraging questions and discussions, not only are you preparing your child to be a better media consumer, but you are also bringing faith into news stories. God is everywhere, with us always. Your witness underscores this truth.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, sometimes it's scary to hear or watch the news when it seems like there are so many bad things happening. But good things are happening, too, and the news doesn't always show them. Help us to remember the goodness in people and your creation.*

# Natural and human-made disasters

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## **For your information**

Natural disasters are any events that seem to threaten creation, whether human, creature, or vegetative life (e.g., wildfires that take lives and destroy the environment), the integrity of ecosystems (e.g., beach erosion after a major hurricane), or the current landscape (e.g., an earthquake followed by a tsunami). Although human beings *may* play a role in causing such events, their role is not obvious. It is the sheer force of nature, along with their unpredictability and general human lack of understanding about them, that makes natural disasters so frightening for both adults and children.

Human-made disasters are events that threaten creation in much the same way as natural disasters. Unlike natural disasters, human beings cause the events, either as individuals or as organizations. Examples include someone generating a wildfire by carelessly throwing a lighted cigarette in a forest, or making a mistake that leads to a massive oil spill. The knowledge that people can cause enormous devastation—intentionally or unintentionally—evokes horror in adults and children alike.

## **Talking to your child about natural and human-made disasters**

- News reports with “on-the-spot” camera interviews often show people while they are still in shock. This may increase the anxiety and fear of viewers, especially children. If children are among the victims, children will be even more affected by the news story and may wonder if this could happen where they live. If the event is far away, say so to reassure your child. Try

to allay your child's fears by explaining that sometimes things happen in nature or are done by people that we don't understand, and they scare us or make us sad. Be empathetic.

Ask what scares them the most about the news story, and listen carefully. Try to answer as best you can. Never underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel, and never ridicule a child's fears. Let your answer be reassuring.

- Talk about the goodness of God's creation. Emphasize that God is good, loves us, and doesn't want to hurt us. God created human beings to be good and to be happy. But God also gave us free will by which we can do good things (helping others in times of crisis) or bad things (maliciously starting a fire). When human beings use free will in the wrong way, it often affects other people, animals, fish, birds, and other parts of creation. This is why free will should always be used for the good. An example of this is first responders and neighbors helping those in need.
- See if your child has a question for God about the disaster. Children's questions for God are often windows into their souls. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless all the people, creatures, and creation that have been hurt by what happened. Help us to remember that we are all members of your family and are all connected to each other. Show us what we might do to help those who have been hurt.*

# Acts of terrorism

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## **For your information**

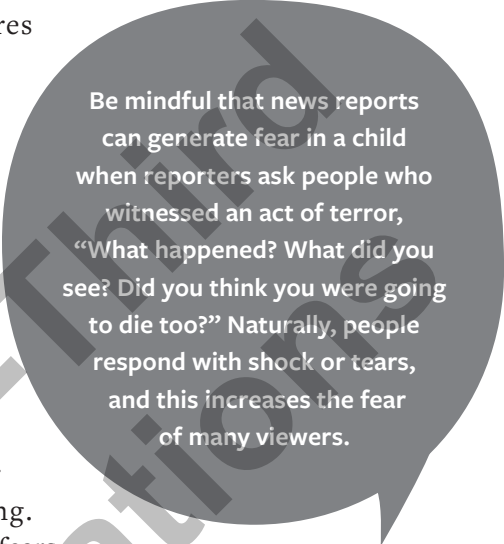
Acts of terrorism take many forms—including bombings, release of toxic chemicals, mass shootings or knife attacks, and intentional killing of crowds of pedestrians by drivers of cars or trucks. Terrorism is so called because these actions strike terror in those who experience or witness them, and even in those who hear about them from afar. There are many excuses for terrorism (such as ethnic, racial, religion-inspired, or political factors). When acts of terror happen in places that are supposed to be safe (e.g., schools, places of worship, shopping centers), children are very likely to become frightened. This is especially true if children see images of children who have been hurt or killed, even if the act of terror happened far away. They think, “If it could happen there, why not here?”

## **Talking to your child about terrorism**

- Although God didn't create the world to be scary, sometimes it is; people do scary things. Remind a child that human beings have free will to do good things or bad things. Sometimes when human beings use their free will in the wrong way, it affects other people, some of whom might be very far away. Point out that some people do not use their free will correctly because their ability to think clearly has been lost because of drugs, alcohol, or mental illness. This also can occur because they misunderstand what their leaders say, what their religion teaches, or what they've been taught. Regardless of the reason, using free will poorly often causes innocent people to suffer, which is very sad. Emphasize that sadness is not God's plan for the world; Jesus taught us to love each other.



- Remind your child that you love her and will do everything you can to keep her safe. If the act of terror was far from where she lives, say so.
- Ask a child what scares him most about the news story, and listen carefully. Never underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel, even for an event that's far away, because young children do not have a clear sense of distance. Let your answer be reassuring. Never ridicule a child's fears.
- See if your child has a question for God about terrorism. Children's questions reveal their feelings. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.



Be mindful that news reports can generate fear in a child when reporters ask people who witnessed an act of terror, "What happened? What did you see? Did you think you were going to die too?" Naturally, people respond with shock or tears, and this increases the fear of many viewers.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless all the people who have been hurt by other people's actions or decisions. Help those people who have caused the hurt to realize how they have hurt others. Help us to not be so afraid and worried, and help us to learn to forgive.*

# Dwelling fires

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## **For your information**

Fires can be very frightening, even more so when they destroy a building that a child knows or visits. Fires can be started by nature (e.g., a lightning strike), or by people unintentionally (e.g., falling asleep with food on the stove), or intentionally (e.g., arson). Probably, the scariest fire to children is a house fire, even when it's not the home of anyone they know. One's home is supposed to be a safe place, and seeing pictures of a raging house fire both fascinates and terrifies most children. Fire's potential for destruction is never as real to children as when they hear that the fire has caused deaths, especially those of infants or children. They will often begin to ask whether their own home has a smoke detector or whether it could happen to them.

## **Talking to your child about fires**

- News stories often feature neighbors of the people whose house has burned. Point out that it is natural for neighbors to be shocked and sad, and even for the firefighters to be very sad. If a child has died, children watching the news story might become very afraid (“Why couldn’t the firemen save them?”) and sorrowful. Respect those feelings.
- Remind your child that fire is a gift from God. It helps us cook food and keeps us warm in cold weather. But fire can also be destructive, hurting people and pets and destroying property. Fires that take lives or destroy property are always tragedies and make us sad, regardless of how the fire got started. This is especially true when a fire was intentionally set, because that fire and the damage it caused could have been prevented.

- Emphasize that we should always respect fire and never play with it. Fire should only be used for the purposes that God has for it.
- Ask what scares her most about the news story and listen carefully. Try to answer as best you can. Reassure her that she is safe. Never underestimate or ridicule the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel from seeing a house fire.
- See if your child has a question for God about house fires. Children's questions often reveal how they think. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

Although some children think that God has a reason for an event affecting certain people, emphasize that God loves us too much to ever hurt us, and fire hurts. Repeatedly speak of your love for your child and your desire to keep him or her safe.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless all the people, creatures, and creation that have been hurt by the terrible fire that we saw on the news. Bless the firefighters who helped to save them. Bless us so that we can figure out how we can help those who lost their belongings and their place to live.*

# Motor vehicle accidents

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## **For your information**

When the news shows the mangled cars in a motor vehicle accident, even good drivers get nervous. “It could have happened to me,” they think. This is especially true when innocent people are killed, such as when a family is killed by a drunk driver or the teens in a car were killed because the driver was speeding.

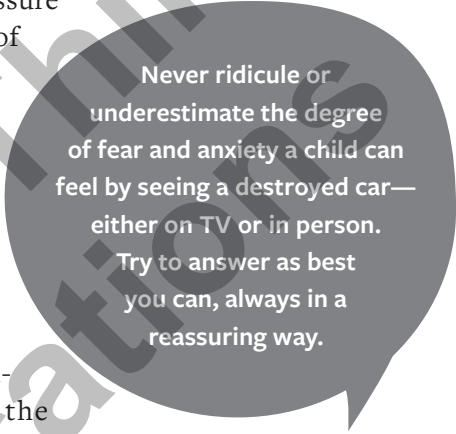
Reporters often interview friends of victims of car accidents, and those friends talk about how “nice” the victims were, making it seem that only nice people are victims of accidents. Naturally, this touches the hearts of viewers, who can identify with nice people. This is especially true when children hear reports about a child dying or a parent’s life lost as a result of a collision. Remind your child that being “nice” doesn’t mean one gets hurt.

## **Talking to your child about vehicular accident stories**

- Let your child know that cars are not inherently dangerous, especially if we obey speed limits, wear seat belts, and keep our cars in good repair. The laws concerning motor vehicles sometimes seem silly, but they are to help us all stay safe. That is why it is always good to wear seat belts in a car and to not distract the driver. Similarly, wearing a helmet when bicycling, keeping a bike in good repair, and obeying traffic signs and lights all serve to keep us safe.
- Since destruction of life and property in motor vehicle accidents is usually caused by human factors, it is even more puzzling to children. We all have free will to act responsibly or not. Sometimes when human beings use their free will in the wrong

way (e.g., speeding, driving drunk), it can hurt others deeply. This is tragic and not part of God's plan. God loves us, and God wants us to love and to take care of each other, not hurt each other.

- Although children sometimes think that God has a reason for a car accident affecting certain people, point out that God doesn't "pick-and-choose" victims; God doesn't want any of us to be victims. Further, reassure your child that because of your love for him, you will do everything you can to keep him safe when in your car or when he rides his bike.
- Ask what scares her most about the news story and listen carefully. Never ridicule or underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel by seeing a destroyed car—either on TV or in person. Try to answer as best you can, always in a reassuring way.
- See if your child has a question for God about the motor vehicle accident. Children's questions for God often express their deepest fears. Encourage a child to pose a question freely and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.



Never ridicule or underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel by seeing a destroyed car—either on TV or in person. Try to answer as best you can, always in a reassuring way.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless all people in the car accident and bless their families. Bless us so that we will always do what is right and make good decisions, especially when we are in cars or on bikes.*

# Personal crime

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## **For your information**

When the news features stories of robberies, carjackings, break-ins, and home invasions, even the bravest adult can become a bit nervous. No one wants to be the victim of a crime. It is bad enough to have one's property taken, but—in many areas of our world and nation—gratuitous violence exists, and criminals do not stop at property. They also take lives.

Children are especially frightened when the news says that the adult victim of the crime had a family or that a child was the victim. Such stories can be very scary, even if the crime occurred far away from where the child lives. This is especially true if the person who committed the crime has not yet been arrested; children might ask, “Could he be here?”

## **Talking to your child about crime stories**

- Let your child know that most people are nice and do not want to hurt them. Crime is often inexplicable to most children. Why would someone want to hurt a person whom he doesn't even know? Because human beings have free will to act responsibly or not, they can use their free will in the wrong way, with devastating effects. This is not part of God's plan. Jesus taught us that people are not for hurting, which is why free will should always be used for the good, since our decisions or lack of care can affect others.
- Reassure your child that because of your love for him, you will do everything you can to keep him safe.

- Ask what scares her most about the crime news story and listen carefully. Never ridicule or underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel from such a story. Try to answer as best you can, with reassurance about her own safety.
- Also reassure her that the crime happened far from where you live (if true). Point out all the things you do to keep your family, pets, and home safe. Discuss what she can do to be safe when she is away from home.
- See if your child has a question for God about the crime that was committed. Children's questions for God often express their deepest fears. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

Although children sometimes think that God has a reason that a crime affected certain people, point out that God doesn't want any of us to be victims.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless the people who are suffering because of the crime done to them, and bless their families. Bless the people who did evil so that they will come to be sorry and try to make amends to those whom they hurt.*

# Child abuse

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## **For your information**

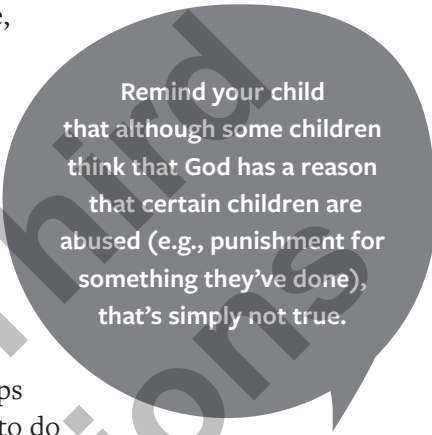
When there are news stories of child abuse (physical, psychological, or sexual), adults are justifiably outraged. How could anyone do that to a child? When children see or hear these stories, they are deeply affected. Even if they have never experienced abuse themselves, their hearts go out to those children who have been treated badly. When children themselves have experienced some form of abuse, they can relive what they have already experienced. In our very fallen world, abuse is a sad reality. And it is frightening. How could an adult (especially someone in a church) treat someone so much smaller than him or her with such force? With such hatred? With such disregard?

## **Talking to your child about child abuse**

- A young child might ask what “abuse” is. Such innocence should be the norm, but all too often, children learn at a young age what abuse is. Explain abuse to the extent you feel comfortable, but be sure your child knows that she can tell you if she is fearful of another person or if she was touched in a way that made her feel uncomfortable.
- Emphasize that no child does anything that warrants abuse. When news stories describe the horror of an abuse situation, many children try to distance themselves from that of an abused child (“if I’m not like him/her, then it can’t happen to me.”). Some children—especially those who themselves have been abused—will wonder how the abused child “brought it on her/himself.”



- In tragic cases of caregivers abusing a child because God “told me to do it,” children can worry: “Would God ask my mom to hurt or kill me?” This is not uncommon. Remind your child that God is love, and love does not want to hurt another. Furthermore, God would never tell a parent or any adult to hurt a child, because God loves children in a special way. Reassure your child of your love and that you would never abuse her or intentionally hurt her.



Remind your child that although some children think that God has a reason that certain children are abused (e.g., punishment for something they’ve done), that’s simply not true.

- God created us all—grown-ups and children—with free will to do good things or bad things, to act responsibly or not. When parents or guardians use their free will in the wrong way, it can affect children and hurt them deeply. This is very sad, because children are not for hurting. It is also sin.
- Ask what scares her most about the abuse story and listen carefully. Never ridicule or underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel when hearing about abuse. Try to answer as best you can, with great tenderness and reassurance.
- See if your child has a question for God about abuse. Children’s questions for God often reveal the things they worry about. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, we heard a very scary story about children who were abused. Please bless them and help them get better. Bless the people who hurt them so that they will learn to be sorry for what they have done. Help us to be the best family we can be by loving each other.*

# Death of a famous person

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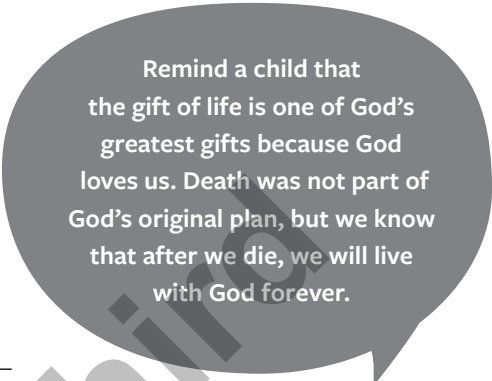
## **For your information**

Although children know that older people die, it is usually a shock to them when a famous person dies, regardless of his or her age. In their innocence, elementary-school-age children often think that fame or money helps one to be immune to death. Young children are even more affected when a famous person (again, regardless of age) whom they love or admire dies. The outpouring of grief after Mr. Rogers died is an example. “How could this happen to him?” children asked. “What will happen now?” If the famous person died by suicide, this presents additional difficulties. Children who don’t know what “suicide” is will ask about its meaning; children who do know what it means will ask why the person did it. This is very upsetting and may prompt some children with emotional disturbances to attempt to take their own lives (the so-called “copy-cat” suicides).

## **Talking to your child about the death of a famous person**

- News reports that repeatedly show video clips of the person who died and speculate as to the reason and cause of death can be disturbing to a young child. Reports might show distraught fans of the deceased, weeping or screaming. This is often very frightening to children, who can start to think, “If this can happen to a famous person, could it happen to someone I know? To me?” Be prepared for such questions. Death is a reality that children must face
- Emphasize that God understands why we are sad when someone dies, because we will not see him or her like we once

did. Even though we don't understand why someone died, maybe there is some purpose, even though there seems like there isn't one.



Remind a child that the gift of life is one of God's greatest gifts because God loves us. Death was not part of God's original plan, but we know that after we die, we will live with God forever.

- [For a suicide] Although taking a life—even one's own life—is wrong because life belongs to God, only God knows a person's thoughts before and as he or she committed suicide. Only God can judge, because God is the only one with all the facts. Remind your child that we shouldn't judge, because we don't have all the facts.
- Reassure your child of your love and that you will do everything you can to help him grow up to be a healthy adult. If he ever thinks about doing himself harm, he can and should speak to you.
- Ask if she has questions about the death and listen carefully. Try to answer as best you can, always being truthful. Never ridicule or underestimate a child's curiosity. Instead, let your answer be reassuring.
- See if your child has a question for God about this event. Children's questions for God are often windows into their innermost thoughts. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, we just heard that [the person] died, and even though we didn't know him or her personally, we are sad too. Bless [name] and his/her family in this very sad time.*

# Angry, hate-filled talk

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## **For your information**

Although children certainly have their own version of angry speech, adult angry speech evokes fear in many children. It seems so hostile, so hate-filled! And because of adults' larger size and strength, children are concerned that angry words can lead to angry actions and violence. Today, it is not uncommon for famous people (politicians, media personalities, sports stars) to say whatever is on their minds in the interest of "telling it like it is." Often, these comments are laced with obscenities, curse words, crude language, ethnic slurs, or frankly threatening language. Sometimes, news reports air these comments as a way to provoke additional responses. For example, "When you heard that he said that, what did you want to say to him?" a reporter will ask an adversary of the person making the comment.

## **Talking to your child about angry, hate-filled talk**

- Be aware that—for children whose language is often carefully monitored by parents—they are often frightened by such language or wonder why adults can't treat each other better. Children think, "Why don't they get punished for talking mean or dirty?" Anticipate that question. Remind your child that God gave us the gift of speech so we could communicate with each other. But human beings have free will and can use that gift to say nasty things and hurt each other. That was not God's intention, because God loves us and doesn't want us to be hurt.
- Suggest that when he hears such talk on the news, he can turn the TV or radio off or log out of the Internet; the

Point out to your child that many people believe that “talking tough” or “talking dirty” makes them seem stronger or meaner (“don’t mess with me”). Emphasize that such talk is not funny; it is hurtful and destructive, and you hope they will not do it. Reassure your child of your love and your confidence that bad language is not necessary to show how terrific they are.

people who own the TV or radio stations or Internet sites often broadcast such talk just to get people to listen. If people didn’t listen, they wouldn’t play it.

- Suggest that if she hears her friends using such language, she should try to walk away from them. She doesn’t have to lecture them, but she doesn’t have to participate either.
- Ask your child if she has questions about the language used, and listen carefully. Try to answer as best you can in language that is direct, honest, loving, and reassuring. Never underestimate a child’s curiosity, and do not ridicule her.
- See if your child has a question for God about obscene or hate-filled speech. Children’s questions for God say so much about what they are experiencing. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, a lot of people say a lot of mean things to each other. Sometimes, they curse, and sometimes they talk dirty. I don’t like it, and I bet you don’t either. Help me to always use the gift of speech in the way you want us to use it—to help others, not to insult or hurt them.*

# School shootings

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## **For your information**

Far too frequently, there are incidents of school shootings or apprehension of students with guns on school property. A school shooting strikes terror in the hearts of parents and students alike. When acts of violence happen in schools, places that are supposed to be safe, children are very likely to become frightened. This is especially true if children see images of children who have been hurt or killed, even if the act of terror happened far away. They think, “If it could happen there, why not here?”

## **Talking to your child about school shootings**

- Remind a child that news reports can be frightening when reporters ask people who witnessed a school shooting, “What happened? What did you see? Did you think you were going to die too?” Naturally, students respond with shock or tears, and this increases the fear of all viewers.
- Although God didn’t create the world to be scary, sometimes it is, even for children in schools. Empathize with your child about how scary it is to see students at other schools injured or with their hands up. Remind a child that human beings have free will to do good things or bad things, and that includes children and teens. Using free will poorly causes innocent people to suffer, which is not God’s plan for the world. Jesus taught us to love each other.
- Remind your child that you love her and will do everything you can to keep her safe. If the school shooting was far from where

she lives, say so. Emphasize that her school has locked doors and a guard (if the latter is true).

- Ask a child what scares him most about the shooting and listen carefully. Try to answer as best you can, with honesty and reassurance. Never ridicule or underestimate the degree of fear and anxiety a child can feel, even for an event that's far away, because children do not have a clear sense of distance.

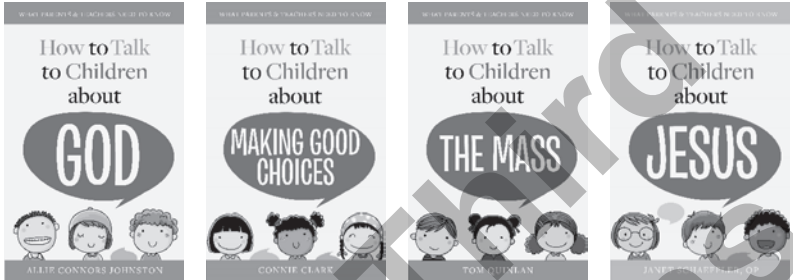
Point out that some people do not use their free will correctly because their ability to think clearly has been lost—because of drugs, alcohol, or mental illness.

- See if your child has a question for God about the school shooting. Children's questions for God are often windows into their greatest fears. Encourage a child to pose a question freely, and try to incorporate it into the following prayer.

### **Pray together**

*Dear God, please bless all the students and teachers who have been hurt by other people's actions or decisions. Bless those people who have caused the hurt, so that they realize how they have hurt others. Help us to not be so afraid and worried, and help us to learn to forgive.*

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