

Responding to Caregiver Questions About the Unrest in Baltimore: Tips for Providers and Staff Working with Young Children

Common Questions from Parents and Caregivers:

Should I talk about the events with my child? Perhaps because he/she is so young, I should not mention it.

Response: If your child is old enough to go to pre-school or kindergarten, it is likely that they will hear or see something related to the unrest in the community. Even young infants are sensitive to the feelings and words of adults around them who may be talking about what has happened. It is far better that your child get information about what happened from you than from another source. Be sure to follow your child's lead in these discussions. If he/she asks you a question, answer it honestly using words they will understand, without going into details that might be upsetting. This will help your child feel safe and communicates to them that it is okay to share their thoughts and feelings.

How do young children understand scary events?

Response: Children's capacity to understand depends on age and ability to comprehend the world. They will not understand events in the same ways that adults do. Even children of the same age, exposed to the same event, can respond very differently.

- **Infants and toddlers** may not logically understand the details of the event, but they are very sensitive to changes in their environment and the reactions and stress levels of their parents and caregivers.
- **Preschoolers** may have more ability to understand the events, are often very curious, and may ask a lot of questions. They may not have a good sense of time or logical thinking (reality versus fantasy). For example, they may not understand whether events happened in the past, are still happening, or are likely to happen again in the future. They may also worry about the safety of you, other close adults and peers.
- **Kindergarteners** will have more understanding of cause and effect, but they still see the world in reference to themselves. For example, they may worry about whether events they witnessed or heard about could happen to them. Similar to younger children, they will may also worry about safety.

How or what should I tell my child?

Response: It is important to follow your child's lead and start by asking if the child has heard anything about what happened. This gives you an opportunity to learn what the child knows, how he/she knows it, and what misunderstandings your child may have about the events. Children should have access to the basic information, but only as much information as they can understand. Too many details may be upsetting or distressing. The decision about how much to tell a child depends on the child's age and developmental stage. Most importantly, all children need reassurance that parents and adults are doing everything they can to keep them safe.

How should I expect my child to react to this kind of information?

Response: Children will react in a range of ways. Children of the same age, exposed to the same event, may react very differently. Some will ask many questions. Others may show little reaction and bounce back quickly.

Common reactions may include: worries about safety, asking the same questions repeatedly, asking no questions and not wanting to talk about it, sleep problems or bad dreams, increased clinginess with parents or caregivers, increased preoccupation with the tragedy or daydreaming; or reverting to less mature behaviors (thumb sucking, for example). These reactions are normal reactions to abnormal events, and parents should not worry about them. It takes time for all of us to calm down from events like these. However, if your child may have been more significantly impacted if they directly witnessed or experienced something upsetting. If you notice any concerning behaviors that don't seem to improve, you should consider getting outside help.

When should I worry about my child's reactions to traumatic news?

Response: Remember that children's responses to a terrible catastrophe are usually appropriate and understandable. Some children will be preoccupied for a few days; others may continue to talk about it for several weeks. Some children may not talk about it for days or weeks. If your child has some reactions after a month or so, or if your family has been more directly affected by an event (e.g., your child directly witnessed or experienced something scary), you may consider outside help for your child. If your family has suffered other stresses or losses, your child's reactions may be more intense. If your child's reactions are noticeably different from those of his/her peers, you may want to seek advice. Remember that you know your child better than anyone, and if you are worried, seek help. You may talk with other parents, your child's teacher, the school psychologist or guidance counselor or your child's pediatrician to get advice on how to help your child. Even very young children may benefit from therapeutic intervention if they are extremely distressed.

Summary: Advice for Parents

- Take the time to be aware of your own feelings and reactions. Children are aware of their caregiver's emotions and worries. If you are too upset, anxious or worried about troubling current events, wait to talk with your child, or ask someone else who is close to them to do so.
- If your child mentions feeling unsafe, talk about ways the family, community, and school are improving safety. Discuss which changes may be temporary versus long-term.
- Be willing to talk to your child about the events particularly if you think he/she might know something about it or have directly witnessed or experienced an event.
- Limit your child's access to television, Internet, social media, newspapers, and magazines with graphic images of violence. For very young children, avoid exposure to the media altogether.
- Spend extra time with your children if possible. Be available to answer questions, and be prepared to answer the same question repeatedly. Give your child enough information to answer his/her questions, but no more.
- Don't worry if your child does not talk about this very much. Children have different styles and timetables for processing information.
- Pay particular attention to daily routines and take extra time for being close to your child. Predictability and routine are comforting for children.
- Offer your child opportunities to help or to do something positive, such as doing an act of kindness for a neighbor or child at school. Children feel better when they can offer concrete assistance.