



A Message from the Director of the
Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health
College of Education and Human Services – Montclair State University

Tragedies in Texas and Ohio

August 9, 2019

Dear Families, Colleagues and Friends,

Our hearts are breaking.

For the past eight years, our Center has issued guidelines on how to speak with young children about difficult events and tragedies that have befallen our neighbors in communities around our nation. We mourned with you and reflected on ways to help you and the infants and young children for whom you are parents and stewards. We did so after Super storm Sandy along our own eastern coast, and around the growing number of public violent tragedies including the Boston Marathon bombing, the Sandy Hook school shooting and the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh last October. We issued guidelines to speak with children about the 2016 election when so many children and adults became worried by the extraordinary level of fear felt by the collective masses – mostly by the very young and immigrants.

We and so many others, have made available many resources to help you in these necessary conversations with children. In the face of these tragedies, children in your lives must feel certain that you will keep them safe. Please contact us at caecmh@montclair.edu or at 973-655-6685 for materials and support. Also visit the New Jersey Association for Infant Mental Health (www.nj-aimh.org) for guidelines on speaking with young children.

By now we have become familiar with the experience of shock, fear, rage and for many a deepening sense of dread and even hopelessness. Infants and children desperately need parents and adults to help them make sense of what is happening in our world and nearby communities. The media make far way events feel close to us - and we must not lose that sense of joining with our fellow humans across the street, across the nation and across the planet. But that is not the entire story of who we are.

As we stand in horror over the mass shootings in Texas and Ohio this past weekend, this letter has a different purpose. It is a call to join together in action – in your own personal lives and in our shared, collective world.

First, our personal lives:

Public tragedies deeply affect each of us and change our human experience by altering our brain systems leading us to filter all events through fear. Our beliefs about our safety are diminished and these changes compromise our ability to hold onto deeply held values and beliefs, and even our ability to use our “thinking” brains to evaluate, reflect, plan and care for ourselves and others. Under these stressors, reflective people often become polarized thinkers. We create “dividing lines”, like “Us vs. Them”, and “Good vs. Bad”. We make snap judgements, risk acting unfairly and unkindly. We become diminished as people.

These violent acts do not reflect the vast decency of our shared humanity.

Yet we feel more frightened, guarded and become more reactive. Our humanity is “short-circuited” when our fears take over. This changes our thoughts, attitudes, our demeanor and posture. Our faces look different to children, our voices more stressed, our movements and pacing more alarming. Our words become more punctuated and crisp, our tension is transmitted to others – particularly for infants and children. Our “brains and minds” change the “brains and minds” of others – especially the young children.

This all happens “below the radar” without our intent or awareness. Being mindful of these changes can help you contain them and talk about them with other adults. This can help us to be emotionally available to infants and young children as we help organize their feelings and thoughts about what they might see, hear and come to understand.

- Even when we do our best to limit exposure to TV and other media about these tragedies, children hear and know something terrible has happened. How you help them “organize” these feelings and information will help them. We do this by listening carefully and calmly. We don’t impose details or meanings that come from our adult world, but we correct accounts, point out all of the “helpers” (as Mr. Rogers reminded us after 9/11), we “lend our calm” to the children even as we honor and reflect their sadness and worry.

We help infants and young children by not enlarging their fear which we adults may feel, and we reassure them they are safe with you. I know this is difficult to do as many of you may not feel you can be certain about their, and your safety. ***But uncertainly is the province of adulthood.*** Children need to feel certain they are safe with you. *If this were to be lost in the face of these tragedies, violence would have prevailed over what children require – safety and security. These violent acts do not reflect the vast decency of our shared humanity.*

- Maintain your values and beliefs about the goodness of humanity and explain that even when bad actions occur, we as a family and community will do everything to be safe.
- Talk about mental health and how important it is for all to feel safe, secure cared for and loved. While we often seek to label the reasons for such acts as ideological – recognizing the reality and toxicity of “Nationalist Terrorism” or “White Supremacy”-inspired violence – those who actually commit such mass violence almost always also suffer from early childhood trauma and early exposure to violence. Often such individuals become isolated and incapable of forming close relationships. All of us – children, adults, parents, teachers, doctors - can try to connect with those we meet to convey our interest in, and care for them.
- Even with our best efforts, we cannot “*catch every leaf*” that falls, but our understanding of the origins of mental illness and the power of relationships to heal and help, can lead us to be better at early identification and support. Each of us can become interested in all of us. *If you see someone (in need), say something.*
- It is acceptable and necessary to feel joy, have fun and engage in humor in the face of these tragedies. This is neither disrespectful nor insensitive.
- Live your family lives as if you were creating the world you hope to have. **These violent acts do not reflect the vast decency of our shared humanity.**

Second, our shared, collective lives

- Talk with your children about helping those who have been hurt and engage in local helping in your community, taking you children to make donations to a shelter or food bank, donate blood, volunteer to support those who are homeless, those

who are disenfranchised, those less fortunate, immigrants who are detained, and so on. Don't do these things alone! Enlist your family members, friends and neighbors. Shared action and responsibility engender shared communities of care – and counteract the messaging conveyed by violence.

- Get involved at the local, state and federal levels. When we are changed as people in the ways described earlier, many of us tend to withdraw – into the privacy and safety of our families, our homes and ourselves. This movement to shift to safety – like a turtle moving its head into a shell – provides brief respite which in the short term can be very much needed. All of us likely sat with our family and friends as we watched the horrible news about El Paso and Dayton. We held each other, shared the shock and horror, cried together, maybe even as adults slept together. Once we help ourselves in the short term, we need, for ourselves and our children, to become members of a shared, active community. Join in diversity-based community or faith-based gathering of prayer and hope, speak out against injustice and teach the lesson that words can hurt even more than bodily injury. Write letters to friends, politicians, elected officials, newspapers, social media – messages that speak of hope and resolve, taking a stand against the inaction of government systems to make necessary changes to gun laws, in needed early intervention and mental health, and in creating a more just society.
- Infants and young children are always watching and listening to how adults are and what we say – especially their parents! This includes those moments when we act in unfair and unkind ways, and when we might believe the children are not paying attention to us. They also listen deeply when we admit that when we are worried or angry that we sometimes do and say things, we wish we had not. **Apologize to the Children** when you do and say unfavorable things.
- Remember, *these violent acts do not reflect the vast decency of our shared humanity.*

Please contact our Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health at Montclair State University with any questions at 973-655-6685 or at caecmh@montclair.edu.

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