

Through Facebook, Twitter, or friends, most youngsters will know about the mass shooting that took place on Friday morning at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn.

Listen to their fears. Dispel rumors. And be honest, sharing as much detail as a child is able to handle.

Therapists who treat childhood trauma said on Friday that parents talking to their children about the mass shooting should address the news directly and soon, allowing the child to lead with questions and concerns. Parents can no longer control what their children know by simply turning off the television. Many children will know what is happening from mobile devices and social media; now is the time to turn those devices off, these experts said.

“It’s important to open up the discussion,” said Melissa Brymer, director of terrorism and disaster programs at the [National Center for Child Traumatic Stress](#), based at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Duke University. “There’s a lot of talk on Facebook and Twitter, and it’s important to clarify what’s rumor and what’s not.”

Dr. Andrew J. Gerber, a child psychiatrist at Columbia, said that parents should come to terms with their own feelings about the massacre before talking to a child. They should “essentially metabolize the awfulness of the event so that what they pass on when they have a discussion with their children conveys a certain amount of thoughtfulness and understanding, rather than raw trauma,” he said in an e-mail.

If a child is frightened, determine the precise source of the fear. It may be a worry that their classroom isn’t safe; or about how to escape school when under threat. “If you say, ‘This bad man can’t hurt you,’ you’ve introduced another fear,” said Dr. Robert H. Abramovitz, a child psychiatrist at Hunter College. “Ask what their worst fear is, and address that.”

Dr. Abramovitz said that parents can be so eager to reassure that they make unrealistic promises, like “this will never happen to you.” “Better to validate the child’s fear, to say that it’s natural to feel that way, and tell them, ‘I’m going to do everything I can to keep you safe,’” he said.

And reinforce coping skills the child may have already used. Dr. Abramovitz suggested asking, “Remember the last time you were afraid? Remember what you did to calm down?” He said, “This gives the child a feeling of having some agency, some control.”

If possible, other therapists said, parents should use family or holiday routines as a comforting structure. Spend extra time with children at bedtime. Read them a book. Engage traditions that remind them what they are thankful for.

Practical questions will soon arise, if not today then soon. Does a child know his or her school’s emergency procedures? What is the family’s communication plan, should something happen?

“For example, texting is a better strategy than calling,” Dr. Brymer said. “The phone lines clog up fast. It may be a matter of children knowing to text, ‘I’m OK.’”

And they should be, especially if their parents check in with them and listen. And remind them of something important: that the world is a good place, even if some people do very bad things.