



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



June 14, 2016

Dear Superintendents:

The mass shooting that occurred early Sunday morning in Orlando, Florida, is devastating and heartbreaking on so many different levels. We mourn with the friends and families who lost loved ones in the attack and pray for a speedy recovery for the injured. Proudly, we stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ and Orlando communities, who exemplify courage and resilience in the wake of such senseless, hateful violence.

As educators, the safety and well-being of our students, colleagues and school community is of paramount importance. Given this fact, I am sending this letter to provide specific resources that you may find helpful to share with staff and families in your districts and to provide information on ways the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) can be of assistance.

### Written Materials

- *The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement* at the University of Southern California developed a guide for parents and guardians on how to talk about the mass shooting in Orlando with children. This document helps explain for parents and guardians the importance of discussing the event with children and helps inform parents of common questions children ask in the aftermath of tragic events. Please find a copy of this document attached.
- *The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)* is a national education organization dedicated to ensuring safe, positive and inclusive school environments for students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. They have compiled online resources with a focus on how to help support gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender students who might need assistance coping in the aftermath of the Orlando mass shooting. <http://www.glsen.org/blog/addressing-orlando-shooting-your-school>
- *The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS)* developed a guide for adults, "Restoring a Sense of Well-Being in Children After a Disaster: Tips for Parents, Caregivers and Professionals," to help reassure children and help them cope after a very traumatic event such as a mass shooting. This document is also attached.
- The third attachment, "Resources Addressing Trauma, Violence, and Grief in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting," is a compendium produced by CSDE staff. Please consult this document for links to additional resources.

The aforementioned resources will be made available on the CSDE's website. In addition to these reference materials, state professionals are also available to assist you with questions or concerns that may arise in the aftermath of the horrific mass shooting in Orlando.

1. The Connecticut Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, School Safety Program, is available to meet with schools and school districts to review and provide technical assistance on their emergency operations plans. This assistance is available now and throughout the summer. For more information, please contact Bill Turley at 860-256-0849 or [William.turley@ct.gov](mailto:William.turley@ct.gov).
2. For questions regarding school psychology, counseling, social work, and health services, please contact the CSDE at (860) 807-2050.
3. For questions regarding school climate, please contact CSDE's Jo Ann Freiberg at (860) 713-6805.

Processing emotions and making sense of such catastrophic events can be very difficult for adults and children alike. However, the strength and resolve of the LGBTQ and Orlando communities serve as beacons of hope for us all. It reminds us of a truth we know too well ourselves—though heinous acts of violence may change our lives forever, these acts do not define us. In these moments, when we band together and ensure that our students, families, staff and communities are supported in having their mental health needs met, when we foster inclusive school environments that celebrate diversity, when love conquers hate, we are defined by our better selves.

As the academic year draws to a close, I hope that those who might need help coping with the traumatic event find the assistance they need. And I wish for you and your school community a safe, healthy and hopeful summer.

Sincerely,



Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell  
Commissioner of Education

## The Orlando Shootings – Parents’ guide for talking to their children

- Why should I talk about this with my children?
- What questions are children likely to have?

### **They will ask what happened.**

Children and teenagers are better able to cope with upsetting news when they understand more about the upsetting event. They need information just as adults do. Begin by asking your child or teenager what they already understand about the tragic Orlando shooting. They have likely heard about it on TV, at school, or from their friends. However, much of their information may not be accurate. As they explain what they know about the Orlando shooting, you can figure out what it is they don’t already know or understand. Look for misunderstandings or frightening rumors. Tell the truth and do not try to mislead them “for their own good.” Children of different ages understand and react differently according to their developmental age and unique personal experiences. It is important to remember that we cannot assume that children's worries are the same as our own. When we listen to our children and come to understand their feelings and worries, we can better help them make sense of these experiences and how they affect us all.

The amount of details that children will find useful will depend upon their age. The older the child is, the more details will likely be needed to answer their concerns. Provide the basic information in simple and direct terms and then ask for questions. Take your cues from your child in determining how much information to provide. Older children may wish to discuss the larger implications of the event. Provide reassurance whenever possible. Our government and police are taking steps to protect us from something like this happening again and keep us safe. Children often look for reassurance that they are now safe after such graphic reminders of danger and hatred take place close to their home and in city usually associated with happy memories. Terrorist acts such as this remind us all that we are never completely safe – but now is the best time to reassure children that they can and should feel safe in their school, in their home, and in their community.



## **Could I have done anything to prevent this?**

After a tragic event, we all wonder what we and others could have done to prevent this from happening.

Even when it is obvious that there is nothing your child or teenager could have done to prevent or minimize the crisis, they may still feel helpless and wish they could have changed what happened. Let children know that this is a normal reaction; we all wish that there is something we could have done to prevent this or any tragedy. Instead, suggest that together you and your child can concentrate on what can be done now to help those most directly affected and to ensure safety, tolerance and acceptance in our communities.

## **Whose fault is it?**

In some ways, blaming is a way to feel as if you can regain control of uncomfortable feelings and the risk being felt. While it is natural to engage in thoughts of blame, this doesn't ease the immediate feelings of grief and fear nor does it provide any solutions for the future. It is understandable that people would be angry at the individuals who commit acts of terrorism and hatred, but sadly sometimes people are also angry at those people that are easier to find and blame – such as people who look like they might belong to the group that was responsible. Children should be told that although it is normal to feel angry, terrorists do not represent a particular race or ethnic group. The Orlando shooting may also cause children and teenagers to become frightened that they may be targeted by people because they may fear others do not approve of who they are. We as Americans take pride in having members of many different races, sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together and continue to be inclusive, accepting and supportive to all who seek peace.

## **Is this going to change my life?**

This is a question that we all struggle to answer, not only for our children but also for ourselves. Especially in difficult times, children may act immaturity. Teenagers may want to spend more time with their peers. Children and teenagers are often very concerned about themselves. When there is a tragic event, they may become even more concerned about what affects them personally. Adults who do not understand this may see this as being selfish or uncaring. It is important to make your children feel comfortable in asking questions and expressing their feelings. Expect your children to think more about themselves for the time being. Once they feel reassured that they are being listened to and their needs will be met, they are more likely to be able to start to think about the needs of others.

## **Can I help?**

Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to help. While there may be little that they can do now to help the immediate victims of this crisis, there is a lot they can do to help. They can start by taking care of themselves – telling you when they are upset or worried, being honest and open. They can also offer help to other members of their community – their friends and classmates, their teacher, and other adults. Over time, they can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for the victims and survivors.

## **Some of the questions my child asks are so painful to respond to. I don't want to make things worse, so should I say nothing instead?**

Often what children and teenagers need most is to have someone they trust listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing the perfect thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns and thoughts, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep our children from ever having to hear about something like this, reality does not allow this. Being silent on the issue won't protect them from what happened, but only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that answers and reassurance should be at the level of the child's understanding.

## **What if this upsets them?**

During these discussions, children may show that they are upset – they may cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are upset. Remember, it is the events that are upsetting them, not the discussion. Talking about the event will permit them the opportunity to show you how upset they really are. This is the first step in coping with their feelings and adjusting to their new understanding of the world. Pause the conversation periodically so that you can provide support and comfort to your child and ask if he or she wishes to continue the discussion at another time. But it is helpful for them to realize that it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

### **What if they don't ask any questions – should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?**

When a major crisis of this nature occurs, it is a good idea to bring the topic up with your children, no matter how young they are. At first, older children and teenagers may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is generally not a good idea to force them to talk with you, but do keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Be available when your child is ready to talk, but let them choose the time.

Often children find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling instead of talking about themselves.

### **How can I tell if my child needs more than I can provide? Where would I go for such help?**

When there is a tragedy of this size occurs, most people will be upset. However, should your child or teenager continue to be very upset for several days and is unable to recover from their fears, or they are having trouble in school, home or with their friends, then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. The Orlando shooting may have triggered other distressing experiences, worries or concerns of your child. You may wish to speak with your child's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they NEED counseling – you should take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

### **What if I have more questions? Where can I turn for answers?**

Visit the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at [www.schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org), the Coalition to Support Grieving Students at [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://www.nctsn.org/>, or the National Association of School Psychologists at <http://www.nasponline.org/>.



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## RESTORING A SENSE OF WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

### *Tips for Parents, Caregivers and Professionals*

Children are often exposed both directly and indirectly to the effects of disasters such as mass shootings. While some will live in close proximity to an area or community directly impacted by disaster, many others will learn about it through the media or from their parents or friends. Parents and caregivers will need to answer children's questions and reassure them about their safety.

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**A common question is "Why do these things happen?" Here are some possible responses.**

- We usually cannot be sure what led a specific individual to act in such a way.
- Such events can result from many causes including mental illness, rage, extreme political or religious beliefs, and hatred.

- Do not stigmatize groups of people who fall within the same or a similar demographic group as an alleged offender.
- Help children understand that government authorities work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they happen.

#### **Communicate effectively with your children.**

- Keep your statements simple, factual, clear and sensitively worded.
- Do not overwhelm children with too much information.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you ask them what they have heard and what they have questions about.
- Children will get information from other children and adults and from the media. Make sure that your children do not misunderstand this information by asking them what they have heard.

#### **If children are anxious or fearful, let them know that you understand and will help them with their feelings.**

- Children's distress responses may be based on a different event. Inquire what their distress is about.
- Distress in such situations is usually very transient. If children's distress persists, seek help from a trusted provider such as their pediatrician.
- Some children may act out as a reaction or may become very quiet. Talk to your child about what is troubling them and not punish or reprimand them for their reactions, but help them to understand that talking may help.

#### **You can increase your child's sense of safety by**

- Knowing their whereabouts, and when they are to return home.
- A clear method of communication in normal and emergency situations (e.g. cell phone and a meeting place if you cannot communicate with each other).
- Keeping them away from places or situations that are likely to put them in danger.
- Being aware of community changes about risks that might surface.

#### **How do you plan for an emergency?**

- Discuss possible emergency situations with your children.
- Talk calmly with them about what they can do if they feel they are in danger.
- Instruct them to trust and seek help from police and other authorities.
- Tell your children to say something to an adult when they see something suspicious.

*Continued*

## Online Resources

If you have any questions about your child's health or response to a traumatic event you can seek professional advice from a community primary care or behavioral care provider or review additional resources at the following sites:

- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
[www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
[www.ncstn.org](http://www.ncstn.org)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)
- American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- American Psychiatric Association  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)
- American Psychological Association  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)
- American Red Cross  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences  
4301 Jones Bridge Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-4799  
[www.CSTSONline.org](http://www.CSTSONline.org) | [cstsinfo@usuhs.mil](mailto:cstsinfo@usuhs.mil)



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## Resources Addressing Trauma, Violence, and Grief in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting

### RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

- *The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement* at the University of Southern California developed a guide for parents on how to talk with children about the mass shooting in Orlando. (Attached)
- [\*The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)\*](#) provides resources for a variety of audiences, including school personnel.
  - [“Talking to Children about the Shooting”](#) offers helpful information for educators and parents on discussing the tragedy with children.
  - [NCTSN’s “Tips for Parents on Media Coverage”](#) provides parents with guidance on helping children understand and cope with what they see and hear in the news regarding the shooting.
  - A [“Trauma Toolkit for Educators”](#) includes information about responding to a school crisis, school safety, the effects of trauma, disaster response, and service interventions; a list of web resources is also available.
- [\*The National Center for Trauma-Informed Care\*](#) is operated by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The website provides information on trauma-informed care, links to models that could be adapted for implementation by schools, and information on training and technical assistance support.
- [\*The American Academy of Pediatrics’ “Talking with Children”\*](#) provides resources to help parents talk to children about violence and disasters.
- [\*Mental Health America’s “Helping Children Cope with Tragedy Related Anxiety”\*](#) provides helpful suggestions on how to discuss anxiety caused by a traumatic event based on the child’s maturity.

### RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE, POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES FOR ALL STUDENTS

#### Resources for supporting LGBTQ students:

- The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is a national education organization dedicated to ensuring safe, positive, and inclusive school environments regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. [GLSEN’s “Ready, Set, Respect! Elementary Toolkit”](#) provides elementary educators with a framework for fostering safe, affirming school climates for all students with a focus on the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) community.
- There are several toll-free hotlines devoted to supporting the LGBTQ community:

- The Trevor Project (youth-focused): 1-866-488-7386 and [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
- GLBT National Youth Talkline: 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline: 1-888-843-4564

### **Resources for supporting Muslim students:**

- [The Islamic Network Group \(ING\)](#) is a nonprofit, national organization and its mission is to counter prejudice and discrimination against American Muslims through teaching. This organization provides cultural seminars for educators and can provide guest speakers for presentations or panel discussions. Some examples include:
  - Education – Understanding Muslim Students: Fostering an Inclusive Environment
  - Responding to Increased Bullying of Muslim/Arab/South Asian Students at a Time of Crisis
  - ING Staff Speak About Educator Resources on Paris Attacks
  - [Bullying Prevention Guide](#)
- [Muslim Coalition of Connecticut](#), located in Bloomfield, Connecticut, is a local resource for Muslim and non-Muslim students alike for promoting tolerance and countering religious prejudice and discrimination.

### **TRAINING RESOURCES AND CLASSROOM TOOLS FOR EDUCATORS**

- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network Learning Center](#) offers a free online learning center providing access to several archived sessions of interest to education professionals. The Schools and Trauma Speaker Series has five archived sessions:
  1. Trauma-informed IEPs
  2. Evidence-based practices
  3. Sudden death on a school campus
  4. Trauma-informed understanding of bullying
  5. School/mental health partnerships
- [Southwest Michigan Children’s Trauma Assessment Center’s School Intervention Project Curriculum](#) resource includes background information on trauma and trauma-informed principles and provides several trauma-informed lesson plans that can be adapted for use with different age groups.
- Education World compiled a list of information, [“Helping Children Cope: Teacher Resources for Talking About Tragedy.”](#) focused on the important role of teachers in helping students cope with and understand unspeakable tragedies. This online resource provides links to materials on how to help students cope with loss and how to discuss violence and terrorism, among other topics.
- [The National Education Association School Crisis Guide](#) offers educators step-by-step guidelines on preparing for and responding to crises.

## **MATERIALS THROUGH THE CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (CHDI) OF CONNECTICUT**

CHDI of Connecticut is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health, and early care systems for children across the state. It offers multiple resources on trauma-informed care and pediatric mental health care. Guardians, educators, and community-based health providers may find the following resources to be useful:

- [Advancing Trauma-Informed Systems for Children](#)
- [Starting Early: The Long Reach of Childhood Trauma](#)
- [Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools: Expanded School Mental Health](#)
- [Best Practices in School Mental Health](#)
- [Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Sustaining a Highly Effective Intervention](#)
- [Developing a Therapeutic Support Service](#)

### **TRAUMA-SPECIFIC INTERVENTIONS**

Several online resources profile evidence-based and promising practices for trauma intervention that can be adapted and used by schools, including:

- [\*National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Empirically Supported Treatments and Promising Practices\*](#): These fact sheets summarize program information and research literature on clinical treatment approaches used by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network centers.
- [\*RAND Corporation's "How Schools Can Help Students Recover from Traumatic Experiences Toolkit"\*](#): This toolkit provides a menu of programs that schools can implement to help children recover from trauma, categorized by type of trauma. Recommendations for securing program funding are also provided.
- [\*Support for Students Exposed to Trauma\*](#): This trauma-specific intervention was designed for implementation by teachers and school counselors, and the program manual, including lesson plans, is available for download.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON CRISIS, TRAUMA, AND DISASTER**

- [How to Help Children Cope with a Crisis - Save The Children](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Terrorism - Tips for Families and Educators – NASP](#)
- [Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope After Disaster and Crisis – AAP](#)
- [Disaster Mental Health and Crisis Stabilization for Children](#)