



Dear Families,

As we reflect on the murder of George Floyd, we are all confronted with the tragic realities of systemic racism throughout our country, an urgent and important issue that impacts families and children every day.

Layered onto the existing stress and trauma brought on by the pandemic, many feel overwhelmed. As a parent, you may be worried about what your children think and feel when they see the pictures in the news, overhear stories of violence and hate, see or experience it firsthand, or notice our anxiety about what happened, and what may happen next. Children are likely to feel confused, anxious, or have questions. And we know you are deeply troubled yourselves. How do we respond to children's questions about tragedies that seem inexplicable? How do we help children understand the complexities of human behavior and that one person's actions are not reflective of an entire group?

Extraordinary events like these not only test us as citizens and human beings sharing a planet, they also test us as parents, both as guardians of our children trying to keep them emotionally safe, and as our children's teachers trying to raise young children who become enlightened and empathetic adults. Children learn from what we say and don't say about the world, and their place in it, from our actions.

For young children in times of unease, the strength of our calm presence and simple reassurances help make the world a safe and manageable place. Because adults determine the emotional climate for young children, adult reactions to difficult events will impact children's reactions. Many people — from young children unable to put feelings into thoughts to adults who have lived through years of world events — have similar questions when facing catastrophic events: "Will that happen to me? Will I always be okay? Will you be okay? Will everyone I love be okay? Will the world be okay?" Some children may see the images on television or in their community and become anxious: particularly those who live in areas where events are taking place, have family members or friends directly impacted, have been impacted themselves, or those that tend to be very empathetic or sensitive to potential threats.

As children get older and their understanding of the world outside their home grows, they not only need us to be calm and reassuring, they may need to ask questions and talk about the larger issues: life is unpredictable; natural and human-made incidents periodically create catastrophe and tragedy. Why? Sometimes innocent people die and some people are more vulnerable than others. Why? How can I help people who are hurting? Of course, adults don't always have the answers, but allowing children to voice their concerns and providing rational and thoughtful responses can be reassuring.

There is no magic formula or right way to respond to a child struggling to understand a tragic event. It is important to know and respect your child's way of being and coping, even when it is different from your own. Further, if you are having difficulty coping with this very tragic event, it is important you seek support for yourself.

With thoughts of healing and hope,
Rachel Robertson, Vice President, Education and Development

What Happened to MY World?

In addition to the resources in this letter, we offer an in-depth guide for parents and caregivers managing the complexities of tragedy, change, stress, and resilience. Download "[What Happened to MY World?](#)" and explore our other resources on talking to your children during challenging times.

Children Need Our Wisdom

Children grow into the kind of people they will become — at least in part — by how we guide them through their questions, concerns and fears, and whether we use the teachable moments thrust upon us to guide and teach them. Our children need our worldview articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They will observe not just what we say, but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature and sense of compassion; our spirituality and feelings; and our willingness to take the time to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that on to our children.

The most important thing we can do for our children is to be there, listen, be our most thoughtful selves, and respond to their emotional and educational needs. The family can be a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears, and be assured that their parents will do their best to protect them. It can be a place to teach them about the world that they will inherit.

Our Responsibility to Children

Some preschool and school-age children will react to these events with anxiety and questions, others with little anxiety but lots of interest. Other children will experience little anxiety and little interest. All of these responses are normal.

Our responsibility as parents is to:

- ▶ Recognize that every child is an individual.
- ▶ Reassure children of their own safety and security.
- ▶ Maintain routine and be consistent, as much as possible.
- ▶ Allow children to play and talk through their feelings and understandings.
- ▶ Limit their exposure to scary images by reducing exposure to the media.
- ▶ Help children participate in global events in ways that are meaningful to them.

Tragedy and Children's Play

It is natural for children to reflect events around them. If tragic events are dominating the talk of adults and the news, you may find young children express their concern or interest in their questions, play, or artwork. Play is the way children work through life events and is an important outlet during difficult times. Children may even re-enact their interpretation of the events. This may feel uncomfortable, but is not cause for concern.

Answering Children's Questions

If your children are interested in discussing the current events or you'd like to raise the topic, be prepared with the facts of the situation and the appropriate language. The key points for talking to any child are to:

- ▶ Tailor your response to the individual child — keep in mind your child's age, personality, and interest.
- ▶ Ask what your child knows and is thinking about; answer questions without over-explaining or providing more details than necessary.
- ▶ Know that children are trying to make sense of the world and in doing so often ask uncomfortable questions. These are the moments we can help them learn. They look to adults to help shape their social-emotional skills so they can be thoughtful and compassionate members of a community.
- ▶ Adults can use children's questions and statements as "teachable moments" to introduce concepts of morality and develop character.
- ▶ If you are outside of the affected areas, your child may ask, "Could it happen here?" Younger children can be reassured simply that we don't think that anything like what they may have seen will happen, and we will keep them safe. Older children may want to know more about the specifics of the situation.
- ▶ Be okay with showing your own emotion. Adults can model for children how to cope with difficult feelings and expressing empathy for others' anguish.

If Your Family is Directly Impacted

We know that every adult does everything he or she can to protect the children in their lives from disaster and tragedy. But, sometimes it is just not possible to do so. When adults are coping with a significant ordeal themselves, along with worrying about their children, emotions can overwhelm. It is unreasonable to think adults, in the midst of a fearful experience, will refrain from showing any stress or fear in front of children. However, even that scenario presents a powerful learning experience for children. Children, who are undoubtedly scared themselves, can learn from the adults around them who are also afraid but work through their fear to make choices and decisions to prioritize safety, to provide comfort to others, and to demonstrate resilience and optimism. Below are a few suggestions that may be useful.

- ▶ Remember that children can read emotion (even non-verbal children). If they see you are worried, but you say you are not, they will worry even more. It's important to provide age-appropriate information and reinforce how your child will be safe. "I am sad right now and I know you are, too. And, that's ok. It's ok to feel sad about a terrible tragedy. But, we can provide comfort for each other during this time and think about what we can do to be helpers."
- ▶ Try to refrain from stopping children's questions or demanding that they are quiet. Knowing they can express their feelings or ask questions is one of the things that will be most comforting.
- ▶ Try to keep a few familiar items with them at all times: a favorite stuffed animal or toy, a blanket, or a pillow. If possible, play soothing music or bring along a favorite book. Singing songs or telling stories can also be comforting for children and adults.

- ▶ Verbalize resilience and optimism. For example, “A terrible thing did happen, but many wonderful things happened today, too.” Provide simple examples from your life. For older children, you can even share stories of responses such as long lines to donate blood or compassionate messages sent from across the country.
- ▶ Talking about the future, sticking to routines, and focusing on things that will remain consistent can provide a lot of comfort. It can be as simple as, “Let’s begin planning our weekend. Should we make breakfast together?”
- ▶ Be vigilant about avoiding adult conversations or news stories where children can hear them. Young children do not have the skills to interpret sophisticated information like how far an event is from their home, what circumstances lead to some people being hurt or injured, the likelihood of these type of events, etc. If a child does overhear something, take the time to explain it in child appropriate terms.
- ▶ Be mindful of children’s access to media, even in the background. News is not reported in a way that is sensitive to children’s developmental abilities to understand and process information. They can easily misinterpret news reports, confuse opinion with fact, see reports of the same incident as multiple incidents, and so forth.
- ▶ Be gentle with yourself. Coping with your own emotions, as well as those of children, is a very difficult task. Try not to do it alone; seek out and accept help whenever possible.

What Else Can You Do?

At Bright Horizons, diversity and inclusion are organizational priorities and prominent aspects of our early education curriculum. Our curriculum element, *Toward a Better World*, is designed to help young children participate in just that — making the world a better place. Active citizenship, inclusive and empathetic behaviors, and stewardship of communities and environments start from the beginning. Young children can do this by: taking on jobs around the house, volunteering in the community, and regularly helping others in need. We also ensure our holiday celebrations are respectful and authentic, and we continually evaluate our resources, including books and materials, to hold ourselves accountable to an appropriately higher standard. You can do this by reviewing your at-home library and your toy choices. We often unintentionally perpetuate bias by keeping children’s world homogenous. Build perspective taking and empathy skills, asking children to consider how others might be feeling. A great resource for this is storybook characters. Ask questions such as, “What do you think he’s feeling? Why do you think her face looks sad/happy/etc.?” No matter what actions we take, it’s important to challenge what we do and think we know, to bravely be willing to evolve, and model this for children.

Helping the Victims

Children learn empathy and compassion by taking actions that help others and watching parents who model kindness, generosity, and compassion. Whether donating to an organization or volunteering, even the smallest actions matter. Make sure your children are involved, or at least aware of your efforts. Events of this magnitude are often times when communities come together in support of each other. Even if you are unable to offer support yourself, showing children photos of others helping exposes them to the compassion of humans, often best demonstrated during difficult times. These are great “teachable” moments for the development of empathy and compassion in our children.