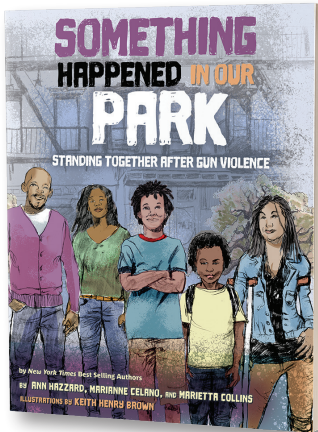




AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Talking With Your Kids About Community Gun Violence



Gun violence is an all too common occurrence in our communities. Children may experience fear, anxiety, and confusion after experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about shootings in their community. The authors of the *New York Times* best-selling, award-winning book about a police shooting, *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice*, Marianne Celano, PhD, ABPP, Marietta Collins, PhD, and Ann Hazzard, PhD, ABPP, created a new book, *Something Happened In Our Park: Standing Together After Gun Violence*, to help kids and grown-ups talk about gun violence and explore positive ways to respond.

This excerpt from the extensive Reader's Note in *Something Happened In Our Park* provides guidelines for discussing community gun violence with children.

The Incidence and Impact of Gun Violence

Every year over 15,000 children and teens, ages 0-19, are killed or injured by shootings, an average of 43 per day. An estimated three million children witness a shooting each year.

Exposure to community violence puts children at increased risk for a variety of negative psychological outcomes. These children spend less time outside and are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, emotional concerns and concentration problems contribute to poorer academic performance.

Helping Children Cope with Anxiety

We all want our children to feel safe. Yet, we also want to prepare them for the dangers they may face. At times, this preparation might increase their anxiety, although appropriate education also increases children's actual safety. These are competing priorities, and finding the right balance is challenging.

Individual and Family Strategies to Increase Safety and Reduce Anxiety

Children who become aware of shootings may become fearful and want to avoid certain activities and places. Other symptoms of anxiety are sleep and appetite changes, physical complaints, concentration problems, clinginess, irritability, or behavior problems.

Check out *Something Happened in Our Park* here:

www.apa.org/pubs/magination/something-happened-in-our-park

Parents have an important role in helping children cope with anxiety. Children sense when their caretakers are stressed, so it is important for parents to develop strategies to manage their feelings. Children also rely on parents to help them understand and manage their feelings. These approaches may be helpful.

- **Limit your child's exposure to graphic violent imagery** in the news or in other media such as video games.
- **Ask your children questions** to find out what information they have and how they are feeling.
- **Discuss your child's reactions and concerns.** Validate their feelings.
- **Help your child manage their reactions** using some of the strategies below, designed to help them cope with feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.
 - **Expressing Feelings:** You can help your children manage stress by coaching them to “turn down the volume” on emotions that feel overwhelming. Deep breathing, drawing, humming or singing, snuggling with a pet or favorite cuddly object, and visualizing a safe place, positive memory, or situation where your child mastered something scary are all calming strategies. Any activity which helps your child feel empowered, like music, sports, or prayer, can help to balance feelings of vulnerability.
 - **Encouraging Positive Thinking:** Positive thinking means encouraging your child to think realistically about risk. It does not mean sugar-coating problems or providing blanket reassurances. The adult-child dialogs section of the Reader's Note gives some examples of how you might help your child evaluate risk realistically. If you are a parent with concerns about the safety of your neighborhood, you might coach your children to develop future-oriented goals which motivate positive behaviors.
 - **Taking action:** As a parent, you want your children to benefit from school and other daily activities. You can help your child face their fears, live their lives, and be part of community efforts. You might decide to increase home security features and tell your child what you are doing to make your home more safe. You could also counsel children about actions that they can take to increase their personal safety such as avoiding specific dangerous areas and situations, and affiliating with peers engaging in prosocial behaviors.

If you or your child are experiencing anxiety or depression that is affecting your day-to-day activities, contact a mental health professional for support. You can find a therapist near you using [APA's therapist locator](https://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/something-happened-in-our-park).

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This Article's Authors

Ann Hazzard, PhD, ABPP, is a co-author of *Something Happened in Our Town* and *Something Happened in Our Park*. As a psychologist, she has utilized therapeutic stories in treatment with children and teens. As a community advocate, she has focused on children's behavioral health and social justice.

Marianne Celano, PhD, ABPP, Marietta Collins, PhD, and Ann Hazzard, PhD, ABPP worked together for over two decades as Emory University School of Medicine faculty members, serving children and families in Atlanta. All three psychologists have been involved in community advocacy efforts focused on children's behavioral health and social justice. Dr. Celano and Dr. Hazzard have developed and utilized therapeutic stories in individual and group therapy with children and teens. They all live in the Atlanta, GA area.

Something Happened in Our Park

Something Happened in Our Park, an important follow-up to the bestselling, groundbreaking, and inspiring *Something Happened in Our Town*, is a much-needed story to help communities in the aftermath of gun violence. When Miles's cousin Keisha is injured in a shooting, he realizes people can work together to reduce the likelihood of violence in their community.

With help from friends and family, Miles learns to use his imagination and creativity to help him cope with his fears. This book can help provide parents with helpful messages of reassurance and empowerment.

Includes an extensive Note to Parents and Caregivers with guidelines for discussing community gun violence with children, and sample dialogues.

Check out *Something Happened in Our Park* here:
www.apa.org/pubs/magination/something-happened-in-our-park