No family is immune from tragedy, whether it’s the death of a family member, a job loss, destruction of home by fire, or wreckage from storms. With the recent news about gun violence in the media, children may sense a greater anxiety in the conversation and behavior of adults.

How children respond depends on their age and experience. Children younger than 6 have limited experience and thus little understanding. They may not be able to imagine something happening outside their home or school. They may relate tragic events to themselves and loved ones.

As parents, we can stay alert to what children see and hear about a tragic event and observe their feelings. We can answer their questions without overwhelming them with details.

It’s also important to be honest. Telling a child at Grandma’s funeral that she “has gone to sleep” may instill fear about anyone going to sleep, for example. We cannot promise that tragic events will never happen, but we can offer reassurance that such events are rare and remind children about what we are doing to prevent or recover from the tragedy.

Mental Health America, the nation’s oldest and largest organization dealing with mental health issues, encourages parents and teachers to talk with children about their feelings. The following is taken from MHA’s website, www.mha.org:

**Quick tips for parents**
- Children need comforting and frequent reassurance that they’re safe. Make sure they get it.
- Be honest and open about the tragedy or disaster.
- Encourage children to express their feelings through talking, drawing, or playing.
- Try to maintain your daily routines as much as possible.

**Pre-school children**
Behavior such as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children, or reappear in children who had previously outgrown them. They may complain of very real stomach cramps or headaches, and be reluctant to go to school. It’s important to remember that these children are not “being bad”—they’re afraid. Here are some suggestions to help children cope with their fears:
- Reassure young children that they’re safe. Provide
extra comfort and contact by discussing the child’s fears at night, by telephoning during the day, and with extra physical comforting.

- Get a better understanding of a child’s feelings about the tragedy. Find out about the child’s particular fears and concerns. Answer all questions they may ask and provide them loving comfort and care. You can work to structure children’s play so that it remains constructive, serving as an outlet for them to express fear or anger.

School-age children
Children this age may ask many questions about the tragedy, and it’s important that you try to answer them in clear and simple language. If a child is concerned about a parent who is distressed, don’t tell a child not to worry—doing so will just make him or her worry more.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS THROUGH TALKING, DRAWING, OR PLAYING.

Here are several important things to remember with school-age children:

- False reassurance does not help this age group. Don’t say tragedies will never affect your family again; children will know this isn’t true. Instead, say, “You’re safe now and I’ll always try to protect you”—or—“Adults are working very hard to make things safe.” Remind children that tragedies are very rare. Children’s fears often get worse around bedtime, so you might want to stick around until the child falls asleep in order to make him or her feel protected.

- Monitor children’s media viewing. Images of the tragedy and the damage are extremely frightening to children, so consider limiting the amount of media coverage they see. A good way to do this without calling attention to your own concern is to regularly schedule an activity—story reading, drawing, movies, or letter writing, for example—during news shows.

- Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing. As with younger children, school-age children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the tragedy. Allowing them to do so, and then talking about it, gives you the chance to re-tell the ending of the game or the story they have expressed in pictures with an emphasis on personal safety.

- Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.” Part of keeping discussion of the tragedy open and honest is not being afraid to say you don’t know how to answer a child’s question. Explain that tragedies cause feelings that even adults have trouble dealing with. Even so, parents and community helpers always work hard to keep everyone safe and secure.

Mental Health America also encourages families to seek help for children when necessary. You can contact a mental health professional at your community mental health center or get a referral from your local mental health association.

Children may need help if they exhibit the following behaviors:

- Lack of interest or poor performance in school
- Absence of age-appropriate anger control skills
- Seeing self as always the victim
- Persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules
- Cruelty to pets or other animals
- Artwork or writing that is consistently bleak or violent or that depicts isolation or anger
- Talking constantly about weapons or violence
- Obsession with violent games and/or TV shows
- Lack of enthusiasm, energy, or motivation
- Overreacting to criticism
- Restlessness and agitation
- Bullying
- Misplaced or unwarranted jealousy
- Withdrawal from friends and activities

The more signs you see, the greater the chance the child needs help. Mental Health America’s toll-free crisis line is 1-800-273 TALK.

Mental Health America also provides informational brochures on children’s mental health issues, such as a Teen Survival Guide to Surviving Stress, Teen Depression, Coping with Loss, Youth Violence and What Every Child Needs for Good Mental Health.
Many families plan gatherings in the summer. It can be a periodic event like a family reunion or a one-time event like a wedding. Such events usually focus on the adults, and often there is nothing planned for children—especially those younger than 6. But with a little planning, you can include the kids and make the event more enjoyable for everyone.

Some questions to consider first:
■ Does the invitation specify that this is an adult-only event? Should I arrange for a babysitter nearby?
■ Would it be more manageable for our family if we attended only part of the event—for example, only the meal and not the ceremony or dance?
■ Are other parents willing to cooperate in including children in the festivities?
■ How big is the space? Is there a corner or room where children can nap? Is there a fenced area outdoors where children can play?

If you decide to bring your children, consider these suggestions:
■ Bring materials to help children be comfortable, such as a portable crib for the baby, diapers, a change of clothes, a favorite toy, or snacks.
■ Before arriving, briefly describe the event and review expectations for behavior. For example: “We are quiet in church.”

BRING MATERIALS TO HELP CHILDREN BE COMFORTABLE.

■ Give children real jobs, such as handing out programs or name tags, where possible.
■ Set up a table with art supplies and encourage children to make their own decorations for the event, such as streamers or flags.
■ Plan games or activities for children. For example, gather baby or childhood photos of family members in advance. Tack the pictures to a bulletin board and have children identify Uncle Harry or Cousin Jenny in the photo.
■ Plan a story time in which elder family members each tell a story about their childhoods. Invite them to bring photos or objects (quilt, gold watch, baseball trophy) for illustration.
■ Set up a movie room where children can watch a film and eat popcorn.
■ Invite a family member to teach children a song in the native language, such as Spanish, Czech, German, or Vietnamese, for example.
Nearly one in four vehicle crashes in Texas involves driver distraction, according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

Distracted driving is defined as “any non-driving activity that a person engages in while operating a motor vehicle.” It includes talking or texting on a cell phone, talking with passengers, eating, smoking, reaching for something inside the car, tending to children or pets, grooming—in short, anything with the potential to take the driver’s attention from driving.

April is Distracted Driving Awareness Month, sponsored by the National Safety Council. It’s a perfect time to educate yourself and make safe driving a habit—before setting out on summer trips.

Why the focus on cell phones?
While many activities can distract drivers, the use of cell phones is drawing increased scrutiny. Talking or texting on a cell phone while driving delays reaction time as much as having a blood alcohol concentration of .08, the legal limit for drunk driving, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In addition, drivers who use a hand-held device are four times more likely to get into a crash serious enough to cause injury, and texting drivers are 23 times more likely to get involved in a crash.

It doesn’t matter whether the device is hand-held or hands-free, “the cognitive distraction is enough to degrade the driver’s performance. The driver is more likely to miss key visual and audio cues needed to avoid a crash,” according to TxDot. Both hand-held and hands-free devices slow reaction time.

The issue has become so serious that several states and many cities have enacted laws curtailing the use of cell phones while driving. For a 2010 survey of state safety programs, see a report of the Governors Highway Safety Association at www.distraction.gov/download/research-pdf/GHSA-2010_distraction.pdf.

Tips for reducing distractions while driving
- Put away or turn off the cell phone when you get behind the wheel.
- If you’re expecting an important call and the phone rings, pull over and stop on a side street before answering.
- Make sure everyone is secured—adults into seat belts and children into safety seats—before starting the car.
- Provide a toy or snack to keep children content. Or assign an older child or adult to tend to a younger child.
- Adjust seats, mirrors, climate controls, and sound systems before starting.
- Finish tasks such as eating and applying makeup before getting into a vehicle or after arriving at your destination.
- Plan your trip with maps and GPS system in advance. If you need to check a route or location while driving, pull over and stop.
- Learn to tune out whining children and keep your eyes on the road. Most children will stop whining if ignored.
- If you can’t ignore a child’s crying, pull over and stop to tend to their needs.
■ Don’t smoke while driving. If children and other adults are in the car, they will inhale your smoke second-hand. Actually, it’s best to quit smoking altogether. Quitting can reduce your risk of heart attack, stroke, and cancer—serious distractions even when not driving.