

An Overview of How a Faith Community Can Be Present to Children & Youth Following a Tragedy

Sue Vogelmann taught kindergarten and first grade for more than 10 years at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. She then served as Church School Director for children, youth and families at Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown for 17 years. While on staff at the church, she continued to work part-time at the school and was working there when a shooting in December 2012 killed 20 students and 6 staff members. She wrote this resource for [Building Faith](#), an online resource hub sponsored by Virginia Theological School.

TURN OFF THE NEWS

In the immediate aftermath, turn off the news — at least keep it off when children and teens are within earshot. The worldwide media that descended on our little town was invasive and often gave incorrect information, which was very confusing and upsetting to our community. Hearing the name of my hometown on national news every day for weeks, months and still, ten years later, was and is so jarring. Turn off the media.

KEEP (SOME) ROUTINES & ALL PROMISES

Keep to some routines. You can adjust things that must be canceled, but keeping some comforting routines will help children see that not everything has changed. Keep all promises you make to children and youth during the crisis. In other words, do not make promises you cannot keep. It is important that they can count on you and your church community when all else is in chaos.

We held our Sunday morning services at their usual times and had church school in our usual 11 classrooms. I did adjust the curriculum for the weeks immediately following, as needed. For younger children, we stuck with the Gospels of Advent since the lessons were exactly what they needed to hear: *"And the angel said, 'Do not be afraid.'"* We had to take a break from any violent Old Testament story lessons for a few years. I gave a handout about what to say and what not to say (a simple one-page version) to all my volunteer church schoolteachers who were terrified about having to talk to the kids. Have that one-page sheet ready ahead of time.

HAVE PRAYERS READY

Formation leaders responded to my online pleas for child-centered prayers because my brain just couldn't sift through all that was happening enough to allow me to write. Have some prayers ready. You'll be praying a lot.

CREATE A LIST OF GRIEF & TRAUMA COUNSELORS

We had therapists and counselors join the classes and adults on that first and some following Sunday mornings, including anniversaries. Have a list of trusted professionals ready. Do not wait until you are bombarded by phone calls and emails from people “wanting to help.” You should have a list of safe grief and trauma counselors so you know who to call.

Find help to cope with your own fears. Provide adult support so that the adults can provide for the children. *Self-care is not an option; it's a requirement.* There were a lot of dark circles on the faces in our pews. Have a self-care support system ready. We had an increase in suicides, divorce rates, substance abuse and more after our tragedy. Share the professional resources for these situations often and make it okay to ask for help — please don't wait for a tragedy.

THERAPY DOGS!

We had therapy dogs join us for weeks/months/years. A tail wagging at the altar rail for communion made us smile (during a time when there were very few smiles). The dogs helped many children return to school and attend other events in our community. These furry comfort animals were such a big part of our lives.

I once overheard my 10-year-old son tell his cousin about our therapy dogs. His cousin said, “You are so lucky to have dogs at school every day.” My son responded, “Yeah, but the reason we have them is really bad.” Look for your local therapy animals; maybe consider bringing some into your house of worship now. That way, you'll all be comfortable should this need arise.

KEEP HANDS BUSY

Having something to do with your hands was a huge help. We used scratch-off paper angels for the kids to respond and wonder after the Advent II Gospel that first Sunday. They scratched in silence and with conversation. We used art and action to express our thoughts, feelings and prayers over time. We did a prayer-weaving activity, had sand to trace prayers in, made finger paintings, signed banners for other communities, made care cards, created lighthouses, made sandwiches, painted murals and more.

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the LORD will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our LORD Jesus Christ,

— 1 Thessalonians 5:2-9

Conversations with Children

GATHER FOR CONVERSATION

Gather together to allow sharing. Be available to talk to kids. Sharing can be very healing for everyone. Silence can make children feel isolated and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving. Like adults, children grieve at their own pace — respect where they are in that process.

LISTEN

Don't force children to share or talk; let it come naturally. During the children's liturgy on the Sunday two days after our shooting, a 6-year-old child raised his hand during the prayers of the young people and said, "My friends and principal were killed. They died." So, I told that child how it made me sad and how it made God sad. We talked about how God sends angels to give us important messages like, "Do not be afraid." We talked about how prayer helps us not to feel afraid. And we prayed for that child's friends and teachers. We prayed for our families and community. We prayed for our first responders. We prayed and prayed. Then we made hearts to give to the families and friends of those killed, hundreds and hundreds of paper hearts (cut out by volunteers who wanted to help).

STAY CALM

Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don't try to make it okay; let them express fears, thoughts, and worries. Give honest information about the tragedy and deaths based on the child's maturity level. Always be truthful: "I'm sad, too." Avoid euphemisms with children.

OFFER SEPARATE SPACE, IF NEEDED

Parents were worried about sending their children, who weren't at Sandy Hook School (Newtown has four elementary schools), to Sunday School class because they thought the Sandy Hook kids might share too much, exposing the innocent to too much information that might be disturbing. So, we had a place for the Sandy Hook kids to talk quietly when they needed to do so rather than share with the whole class. But we also reminded parents that their children will hear things — on the bus, at soccer, etc., and talking about it with a trusted adult in the room is a better way for their child to process. God understands hard things. Jesus cried.

It's okay to say that you don't have all the answers: validate thoughtful questioning.

Supporting Older Children & Teens

Older children are drawn together in situations of tragedy and will draw strength and support from each other. Give the teens choices about what they want and need. Our teens found solace in taking action and helping others. Foundation fundraisers, work camps, service trips and community service all continued to be important parts of our healing.

Ben's Lighthouse was founded in memory of Trinity parishioner Ben Wheeler. "Helping is healing" was the motto for those first few years, along with "Stand tall, shine bright." I led and chaperoned several youth trips for Ben's Lighthouse across the country. Our teens were shining examples of the light in the darkness. Now, those young Sandy Hook student survivors continue to light the way as teens and young adults.

Advice for something like this is hard to give. I have a long list of Bible verses, song lyrics and quotes about the light in the darkness. Focusing on the light in a dark place was and is where I draw my strength. Have that list ready. I hope and pray you don't need it.



The Episcopal Diocese of San Diego, in partnership with Episcopal Relief & Development, provided emergency grants for supplies and home goods in response to the flooding in the area.