

Parenting Through Tragedy: Discussing Political Violence with Our Children

The assassination of Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University has captured the world's attention, including many of our tweens and teens. As parents, many of us now face the difficult task of helping our children process this killing while using it as an opportunity for meaningful growth and understanding.

When news like this reaches our children, it can create a mix of emotions, including sadness, confusion, even a sense of schadenfreude if they didn't like the person, and all-too-often, an unhealthy fascination. It's amplified by the fact that vision of the murder is available online on every platform (which is another reminder of why we need strong social media minimum age legislation).

Rather than allowing such tragic events to become a form of "news entertainment" or fuel for divisive arguments, we can guide thoughtful discussions that help our children develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a deeper understanding of complex societal issues.

Essential Conversation Starters

Here are several carefully crafted discussion points to explore with your children, adapted for their age and maturity level:

Free Speech and Democracy

1. Should people be allowed to speak their mind, even when others strongly disagree?

Help children understand that democracy depends on the free exchange of ideas, even uncomfortable ones.

2. Should there be limits on what people can and can't say?

Explore nuanced examples: Should platforms be given to those who promote hate speech or Nazism? What about medical misinformation? Anti-religious vitriol? Racist? Sexist? How do we balance free expression with protecting vulnerable communities?

3. At what point does speech cross a line and become unacceptable?

Discuss the difference between disagreement and harassment, between robust debate and threats of violence.

Violence and Conflict Resolution

4. Is violence ever acceptable in response to words another person speaks?

Help children understand that while words can hurt, physical violence is not an appropriate response to speech we disagree with.

5. Are words dangerous? Why or why not?

Explore how language can inspire both positive and negative actions, and our responsibility to use words thoughtfully.

6. How should we respond to speech we find deeply offensive or harmful?

Discuss constructive alternatives: counter-speech, peaceful protest, voting, and community organising (and how it differs from cancelling someone or violence).

Digital Citizenship and Social Media Ethics

The digital dimension of this tragedy offers particularly important teaching moments:

7. Is it appropriate to use social media to post, view, or share content that shows harm or death?

Discuss the human dignity of victims, the impact on families, and the difference between being informed and being voyeuristic.

8. When someone dies whom we disagreed with politically, how should we respond online?

Should people use their platforms to score posthumous political points? To celebrate death? To silence opposing views? Help children understand that basic human decency transcends political disagreement.

9. How do we consume tragic news responsibly?

Discuss the importance of verified sources, the impact of constant exposure to violence, and taking breaks from news when overwhelmed.

10. What role does social media play in political polarisation?

Explore how algorithms can create echo chambers and how inflammatory content spreads faster than thoughtful analysis.

Age-Appropriate Approaches

Primary School (Ages 6-11): Focus on basic concepts of kindness, safety, and how we treat people we disagree with. Keep discussions brief and reassuring.

Middle School (Ages 11-13): Introduce more complex ideas about democracy, free speech, and peaceful conflict resolution. Acknowledge their growing awareness while providing guidance.

High School (Ages 14-18): Engage in sophisticated discussions about political violence, media literacy, and civic responsibility. Encourage them to think critically about information sources and their own digital footprint.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.

Creating a Safe Space for Difficult Conversations

- **Listen more than you speak.** Allow children to express their fears, confusion, or even inappropriate reactions without immediate judgement.
- **Validate emotions while correcting misconceptions.** It's normal to feel scared, angry, or confused about violence.
- **Model the behaviour you want to see.** Show respect for human dignity even when discussing people whose views you oppose.
- **Be honest about your own struggles.** It's okay to say, "I don't understand why someone would do this either".
- **Focus on what we can control.** Emphasise positive actions like kindness, civic engagement, and building community connections.

The Bigger Picture

A man—a husband and father of two—has been murdered. There is a human element to this that transcends politics. Yet it's also essential to be clear: debating publicly doesn't automatically make someone's ideas democratic or right.

Charlie Kirk promoted views that many people—including parents reading this—find deeply troubling. Others, of course, find him inspiring and connected to truth. Inviting our children to look at what he actually said, rather than treating him only as a victim or a symbol, helps them see that civility in debate is typically the best way for an argument to be won or lost.

This is also a moment to help kids recognise that violence is never the answer—even while acknowledging that people sometimes feel it *is* justified. Ask: *Have you ever thought a violent response might be acceptable? Why? What else could be done instead?* These reflections build empathy and critical thinking.

History matters here too. Teach world history alongside current events so children can see the fine line between politics and propaganda, and how movements for justice—and for harm—have arisen in every era.

Finally, explore ideological bias. We all hold views that shape when we think force is acceptable—whether in wars abroad, protests at home, or conflicts between countries we identify with and those we don't. Helping kids notice these biases doesn't mean excusing violence; it means raising thoughtful citizens who can examine their own assumptions before judging others.

As parents, we're not going to help our children work out who they are and be resilient if all we do is shield them from opposing views. Instead, we want to help them navigate life's big issues with wisdom, compassion, and hope. In doing so, we raise a generation better equipped to preserve democracy and human dignity in an increasingly complex world.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.