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Your Family

How to talk to your children about the sudden deaths of young people

Parents are advised to watch their child's emotional reaction and to monitor their social media use

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Parents should remain alert to how their children and teenagers are coping



Sylvia Thompson

Wed Apr 12 2023 - 15:08



Talking to children about death is something many adults find difficult to do as they struggle with the loss of a friend or family member. And, when young people die in sudden or unexpected situations, it can be even more difficult for everyone to process the emotions that arise.

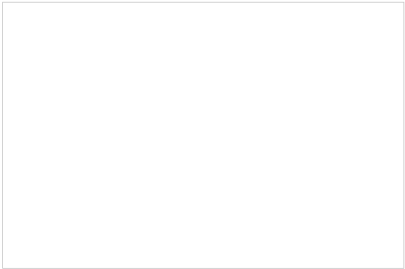
The [death of two teenagers](#), Lukas Joyce (14) and Kirsty Bohan (14), in a car crash in the early hours of Monday morning in Co Galway, came as a devastating shock to the local community – as it did to families across the country during the Easter school holidays.

The car in which the four teenagers – a 14-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy remain in hospital following the incident – were travelling struck a tree on the N84 between Galway and Castlebar at about 5.45am.

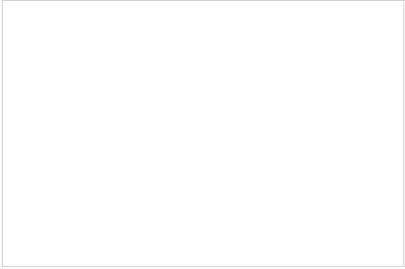
Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) have been at the Presentation College in Headford, Co Galway, over the past few days to help students at the school that the teenagers attended deal with the tragedy.

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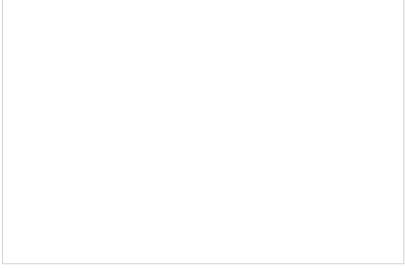
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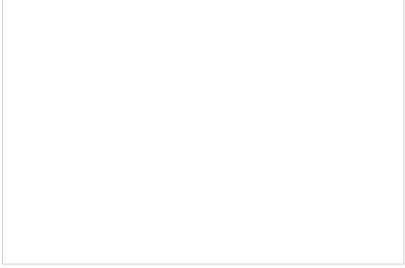
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But how should parents talk to children and teenagers in their own homes about the sudden and unexpected deaths of young people who are the same age as themselves or their siblings?

[John Sharry](#), child and family psychotherapist, says preschool and young children should generally be protected from the details of, and particularly from images of, tragic and disturbing stories. “I think there is no benefit in a young child hearing about the story at all and, where possible, I would protect them. Though we are not in control of all the information they are exposed to, simple prudence in the home such as waiting until they are in bed before watching the news or listening to the story on the radio makes sense,” says Sharry.

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However, with older children and teenagers, Sharry says that it is important to talk directly to them about what’s happened. “The key is to first ask what they think and feel and then share your own thoughts.”

He advises parents to watch carefully for the child’s emotional reaction to the event. “Some children are very matter-of-fact about what happened and move on quickly after a few details. For others, the news might worry them and it is important then to encourage them to talk some more and then to be very reassuring and supportive.”

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Following the deaths of Lukas Joyce and Kirsty Bohan, parents of students in the Presentation College in Headford were urged to take time and listen

and discuss any concerns their children might have. The acting principal, Orla Jackson, was critical of the “conjecture and downright lies” written about the crash by some social media users. A letter from the board of management of the school advised parents to monitor their children’s social media activity over the coming days and reinforce “the need to be extremely sensitive and careful about what they post”.

Alex Cooney, chief executive of [Cybersafekids.ie](https://www.cybersafekids.ie), says that children’s need for social connection offline and increasingly online is really strong. “In general, young people get their news from social media and it is how they connect with each other. Things can get amplified when there are five or 10 people in a group chat and things get shared with other groups,” she explains.

Cooney says that she would reiterate the school’s advice to parents to closely monitor their children’s social media activity over the coming days, to talk to them about what they are viewing online, and to encourage them to try to steer clear of reading or engaging with any negative and/or inaccurate comments.

The key for parents, according to Cooney, is to engage with their children about what they are seeing and doing online. “This will provide an opportunity to counter any misinformation which is often due to sensationalising rather than a deliberate attempt to mislead. Parents should talk to their children and counter any misinformation in a sensitive and age-appropriate way.”

[[‘What happens when I die, mama?’ – explaining the inexplicable](#)]

In the days and weeks after the outpouring of grief at the funerals of the teenagers, parents should remain alert to how their children and teenagers are coping.

“Children are actually quite resilient when dealing with traumatic events but it’s worth watching if they are anxious, edgy, nervous or agitated,” says Dr Malie Coyne, a clinical psychologist based in Galway.

Other concerning signs are if a child is having difficulty concentrating, refusing to go to school or has lost interest in life. “It’s important to reassure children that you will do everything to keep them and your family safe,” adds Dr Coyne. “Watch for times when your child is ready to talk. Some children may need more physical contact and cuddles at this time.

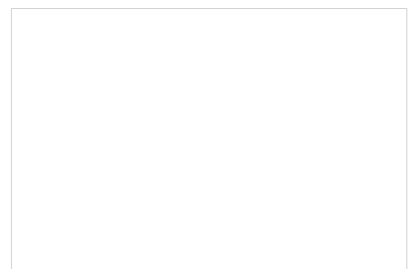
“And don’t be afraid to show your feelings in front of your children as it helps them to see that these reactions are normal and can provide good coping models.”

She recommends that parents contact their GP if they are concerned their child is acting differently weeks later.

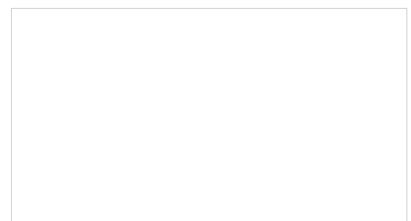
Galway

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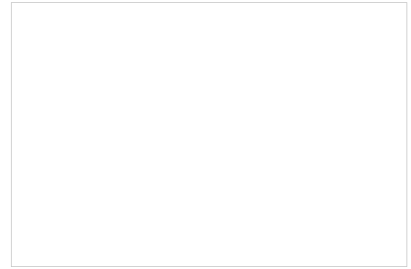
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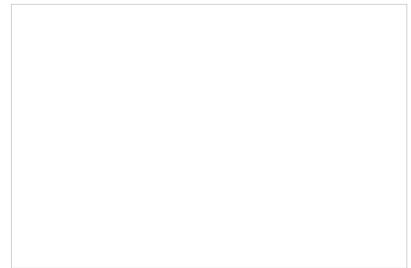
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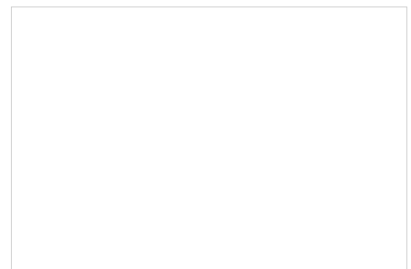
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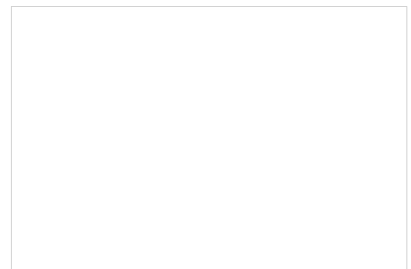
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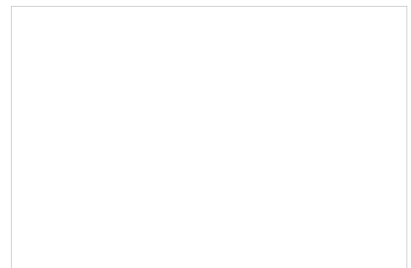
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