



In times of crisis



IMAGINE STEPPING INTO
YOUR CHILD'S WORLD AND
SEEING THINGS FROM HIS
OR HER POINT OF VIEW.

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Helping children cope with the media during times of unrest

During times of national unrest, parents have tough choices to make. They want to know the latest news, but they don't want it to upset their children.

When a national tragedy happens, it's not easy to keep this news from children. A child may hear people talking about it, like teachers at school or other children. Like adults, children want to know what is going on. The key is to give them the truth without scaring them.

Is it okay to let my daughter watch the evening news with us?

It depends on her age. Experts say that it might be frightening for children under 10 to watch the news or for it to be on when the children are nearby. Older children are able to understand more about news and the different views of the parties involved. Here are some things to keep in mind:

Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Even very young children can understand when something bad has happened. Infants may sense that their parents are upset. Toddlers and preschoolers can tell from pictures and video that someone has been hurt or that property has been destroyed.

Young children can't tell the difference between fantasy and real events. They may react differently to news reports. For example, some children may believe that the news is just like other pretend shows they see on television—they are very far away and didn't really happen.

Other children may react more strongly to the news. They may be afraid that a character from a scary movie will attack them in their sleep. They might also be afraid that the events will happen to them or someone they know.

Children at this age believe that everything has something to do with them. They may think that they did something to make terrible things happen. It is important to tell children that they had nothing to do with a bad event. *"That happened in a city far away. It did not happen because of anything you did, thought, or said."*

School-aged children

School-aged children have very active minds. Although some children can tell what is real from what isn't, many of them think that the bad things will happen to them. For example, a child who watches the news about a fire in town may understand that the fire destroyed someone's property. However, he may begin thinking that a fire will destroy his family's home, even though the chance is very small as long as his family does things to be safe.

Adolescents

Teens can think and talk more about events. They can tell truth from untruth. They can understand that the groups involved have different views and may have different reasons for what they are doing. You can help teenagers use their critical thinking skills by asking them questions: What really happened and what evidence is there? What are the pros/cons for each party involved?

How much should I tell my child about what is going on?

Talk with your child about national events like you would about other difficult topics. Find out how much information she needs. A good starting point is to ask her what she already knows. Explain what happened in a very simple way. *"Donna, some bad things happened today in _____.* *What do you understand about that news? What do you think about it? How does it make you feel? Do you have any questions about what is happening or what might happen? You may have questions later about what happened. I want you to know that you can always talk with me about anything that concerns you."* If she has more questions, give her simple and truthful answers. If you do not know the answers to her questions, you can offer to find the answers together.

How can I keep my child from feeling bad after watching disaster coverage on the news?

- Watch the news with your child. Once your child is old enough to watch the news, watch it together. Doing so will give you a better idea of what he or she knows about world events.
- Don't watch news video over and over. Although we often want to know as much as possible about what is happening, continuously watching the same upsetting pictures can frighten a child (and is probably not helpful for adults either).
- Take time to talk about the events. Make sure that you choose a time and place where neither of you will be disturbed. Ask your child what she has heard or knows about the events. What questions does she have? This is also a time for parents to discuss their own ideas and values with their children.
- Reassure your child. Although there are no guarantees in life, tell him that you will do your best to keep him safe. Tell him that you love him and always will.

How can I tell if my child is upset by all the news of this event?

Watch your child for any signs that something is wrong. Does he have any new fears, anxieties, behavior, or acting out problems? One sign to look for is sleeplessness. Other signs may be patterns of crying or talking about being afraid. Children who feel stressed may also show behaviors they had outgrown, like bedwetting.

My child seems so sad about what is in the newspapers, on television, and on the Internet right now. How can I help my child focus on more positive things?

Although the news covers a lot of bad events, reporters also look for positive ways that people are dealing with tragedy. You can show him how the community is working to help those hurt by the tragedy, like with fundraisers or food drives. Although bad events may make people angry and afraid, the work of the many heroes and helpers can help children feel hopeful and proud.

Sources:

American Academy of Pediatrics, *Children and the News*.

[On-line] Available: [www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/67.htm]

Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation, *Talking with Kids about the News*.

[On-line] Available: [www.talkingwithkids.org/television/twk-news.html]