

How to Talk to Children about Bad News

Children get their news from many sources and these are not always correct. How do you talk about bad news, and listen to your children's concerns in times of crisis?

Shootings, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, end-of-the-world predictions, reports of shootings; all can be upsetting even for adults, much less children. In our social media enabled world, it's become nearly impossible to shield children from distressing events.



Today, children get news everywhere. This constant stream of information shows up in sharable videos, posts, blogs, feeds and alerts. And since much of this content comes from sites designed for adult audiences, what your children see, hear, or read might not always be age appropriate. Making things even more challenging is children are getting this information directly on their phones and laptops. Often parents aren't around to immediately help their children make sense of horrendous situations.

The bottom line is children simply don't have the ability to understand news events in context, much less know whether or not a source of information is credible. And while older teens are better able to understand current events, even they face challenges when it comes to sifting fact from opinion — or misinformation.

No matter how old your child is, threatening or upsetting news can affect them emotionally. Many can feel worried, frightened, angry — even guilty. And these anxious feelings can last long after the news event is over. So what can you do as a parent to help your children deal with all of this information?

Tips for all Ages

Reassure your children they're safe. Tell your children even though a story is getting a lot of attention, it was one event and was likely a very rare occurrence. And remember, your children will look to the way you handle your reactions to determine their own approach. If you stay calm and considered, they will, too.

Tips for children under 7

Keep the news away. Turn off the TV and radio news at the top of the hour and half hour. Read the newspaper out of range of young eyes easily frightened by the pictures. Preschool children don't need to see or hear about something that will only scare them, especially because they can easily confuse facts with fantasies or fears.

At this age, children are most concerned with your safety and separation from you. They'll also respond strongly to pictures of other young children in jeopardy. Try not to minimize or discount their concerns and fears. Reassure them by explaining all the protective measures for keeping them safe. If you're flying somewhere with them, point out airport security and the people who work hard to keep us all safe.

Tips for children 8-12

Carefully consider your child's maturity and temperament. Some can handle a discussion of threatening events. If your children tend toward the sensitive side, be sure to keep them away from the TV news; repetitive images and stories can make dangers appear greater, more prevalent and closer to home.

At this age, many children will see the morality of events in stark black-and-white terms and are in the process of developing their moral beliefs. You may have to explain the basics of prejudice, bias and civil and religious strife. But be careful about making generalizations, since children will consider what you say to be absolute truth. This is a good time to ask them what they know, since they'll probably have gotten information from friends and you may have to correct some of their information.

You might explain even news programs compete for viewers, which sometimes affects content decisions. If your children use the Internet, go online with them. Some of the pictures posted are very graphic. Monitor where your children are going online and set your home page to open to non-news-based portals.

Tips for teens

Check in. In many instances, teens will have absorbed the news independent of you, so talking with them can open discussions of their developing politics and sense of justice. It will also give you the opportunity to share your own insights while being careful to not dismiss theirs, as this will shut down your conversation immediately.

Many teens will feel passionately about events and may even personalize them if someone they know has been directly affected. They'll also probably be aware their own lives could be impacted by terrorist tactics. Try to address their concerns without dismissing or minimizing them. If you disagree with media portrayals, explain why so your teens can separate the mediums through which they absorb news from the messages conveyed.

Additional resources

For more information on how to talk to your children about a recent tragedy, the [National Association of School Psychologists](#) or the [American Psychological Association](#) have additional resources.

Sources:

Knorr, Caroline. "Explaining the News to Our Kids." 02 Oct. 2017. Web. 02 Oct. 2017. <<https://www.common sense media.org/blog/explaining-the-news-to-our-kids>>.