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Explaining the News to Our Kids

Disturbing news events can leave us speechless. Knowing how and when to talk with kids—and when to listen—can help.

By **Common Sense Media** | October 10, 2023

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Kids of all ages are getting news from a variety of places. Whether it's from friends, TikTok, YouTube, or home, they can be inundated with information, different perspectives, and even graphic images and videos of breaking news. Kids in elementary and middle school may have trouble fully understanding news events. And though older teens are better able to understand the gravity or complexity of situations, even they face challenges when it comes to sifting fact from opinion—or misinformation. News comes at a speed that can have a dramatic impact.

No matter how old your kids are, threatening or upsetting news can affect them emotionally. Many can feel worried, frightened, angry, or even guilty. And these anxious feelings can last as additional details are revealed and reported. So what can you do as a parent or caregiver to help your kids process all this information?

Addressing News and Current Events: How to Start

Consider your own reactions. Your kids will look to the way you handle the news to determine their own approach. If you stay calm and rational, it's likely they will, too. And if the news is affecting you to the point of not being able to console others, share and discuss everyone's feelings—including your own.

Get informed. Kids will have lots of questions. Prepare yourself with the latest reports from credible news sources so you can decide what to share and ways to share it. Not all kids will need the details, but they will be looking for reassurance. It will be easier to have a position, share your family's values, and discuss things with a potentially overwhelmed child once you've taken the time to gather accurate, up-to-date info and assess your child's needs.

Take action. Depending on the issue and kids' ages, families can find ways to help those affected by the news. And showing kids how they can support a cause is a positive way to ease their fears while getting involved. Families can attend meetings or protests; kids can help assemble care packages or raise money to donate to a rescue or humanitarian effort. Check out websites that help kids do good in the world.

Tips for kids age 7 and under

Keep the news away. Keep the news out of range of young eyes that can be frightened by the pictures and videos. Kids may respond strongly to images of other kids who are in danger. Remember that news comes through a variety of platforms and sources, from pop-up notifications on your phone to your kids' favorite YouTuber. Preschool kids don't need to see or hear about something that will only scare them silly, especially because they can easily confuse facts with fantasies or fears.

Tell them that your family is safe, loved, and valued. At this age, kids are most worried about safety and separation from you. It's important to help them feel safe and cope with their feelings, even during troubling times. Try not to downplay their concerns and fears. Reassure your kids by explaining all the ways they can find protection and help, like reaching out to family and loved ones. If the news event happened far away, you can mention the distance to comfort them.

For kids who live in communities that experience higher rates of violence, news of tragic events may trigger extra fears. If that happens, share a few age-appropriate tips for staying and feeling safe, such as staying close to a trusted adult, knowing who to contact in case of an emergency, and avoiding police activity.

Be together. Though it's important to listen and not belittle their fears, distraction and physical comfort can go a long way. For younger kids, watching something cheery or doing something together may be more effective than logical explanations.

Tips for kids age 8–12

Carefully consider your child's maturity and temperament. Many kids can handle a discussion of threatening events, but if your kids tend toward the sensitive side, be sure to keep them away from overexposure to the news. Repetitive images and stories can make dangers appear greater, more widespread, and closer to home. Remember that kids this age are getting news from social media influencers and friends. Simply turning off the official news will not shut them out from current events.

Be available for questions and conversation. At this age, many kids will see the morality of events in stark terms and are in the process of developing their moral beliefs. You may have to explain the basics of prejudice, bias, civil and religious strife, or military conflict. Likewise, providing historical context can clarify that not all incidents are random, and that they're often tied to larger, longer chains of events. This is a good time to ask them what they know, since they'll probably have gotten their information from everywhere but the experts, and you may have to correct the facts.

Talk about—and filter—news coverage. You might explain that even news programs compete for viewers and clicks, which sometimes affects decisions about the content they show. Images online or on TV can be graphic and shocking—for anyone. Monitor where your kids are going online, and consider setting new rules or parental controls if they aren't able to control their curiosity.

Tips for kids age 13+

Check in. In many instances, teens will have absorbed the news independently. Talking with them can offer great insights into their developing politics and their senses of justice and morality. It will also help you get a sense of what they already know or have learned about the situation from their own social media. And it will give you the opportunity to throw your own insights into the mix. Try not to dismiss their opinions, since that will shut down the conversation immediately.

Let teens express themselves. Many teens will feel passionately about events, and may even feel connected to them if someone they know has been directly affected. They'll also probably be aware that their own lives could be affected by violence. Try to address their concerns without dismissing or minimizing them. If you disagree with media portrayals or influencer perspectives, explain why so your teens can separate the sources they get news from and the messages they convey.

It's also important to remember that teens aren't just consuming news on social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube, they're also expressing their own views and opinions on current events. Talk to them about ways they can express themselves safely and responsibly.

Additional resources

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

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