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What's Happening? Talking to Children about Current Events

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These days, we have the ability to watch news as it is breaking. With an abundance of televisions, tablets, and mobile phones that give us immediate access to the news, internet and social media, we can stay informed about current events as they are happening. Having information available at our fingertips allows us to keep up with traffic updates as we travel from one place to another, find out the results of elections as the polls are closing, watch live sporting events, prepare for rough weather before it affects us, get up-to-date news about local events, and so much more! But there is a downside to the constant exposure we have to new information...

It is impossible to shelter our children from tragic events when they occur. As soon as something bad happens, people start tweeting, posting, or sharing about it on social media. News anchors begin covering tragic events as information starts trickling into the newsroom – sometimes even interrupting regularly scheduled television programs to bring you the latest information. Coverage of tragic events can last for days or even weeks. Even if you could prevent your children from hearing about these events in your home, it would be difficult to keep them from hearing about them from their friends, teachers, or other people in the community.

How Do Tragic Events Affect Children?

As difficult as it is for adults to try to make sense of tragic events, it is even more difficult for children (especially younger children) to understand what is happening. Even if the event happened on the other side of the world, coverage of the event may make children feel that it happened much closer to home. Children may be afraid that a similar event might happen to them. They may worry about how it may affect them or the people they love. They may even begin to see danger in common, everyday occurrences (such as a rain shower after news of a destructive hurricane).



What Should We Say To Our Children?

Trying to shield children from the truth may only add to their fears. Staying quiet after something scary has occurred may cause children to misunderstand what is happening and how it might affect them. Here are some tips to think about when you talk to your children about tragic current events:



- **Pay attention to what your children are looking at on television and the internet.**

Limit your children's exposure to the media. Try to avoid watching the news on television in the presence of young children.



- **Watch for changes in behavior.** Changes in children's behavior (such as extreme shyness, fear, or anger) may indicate that they are having difficulty coping with a scary event.



- **Monitor your own level of anxiety.** If children see that you are anxious, they will feel more worried and vulnerable.

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- **Consider the age of your children when deciding how much information to discuss.** Simple explanations are best for younger children who only need to know basic facts. Older children and teenagers are better equipped to handle more information.



- **Find out what your children have already heard.** Ask open-ended questions such as "What do you know about ___?" Follow up with questions that can help them think about and process information such as "What do you think we can do to help?"



- **Tell the truth.** It's okay to say "I don't know." Many times when bad things happen, we don't have answers for the "why" questions that follow. Be honest, but encourage your children to talk openly about the situation and let your children know that they can always come to you with any questions they have.



- **Reassure your children that they are safe.** Listen to your children and acknowledge their feelings. Then let them know that you are doing everything possible to keep them safe.



- **Seek professional help.** If you sense that your children are not handling the situation well or if you are feeling overwhelmed, it's okay to get help from a licensed mental health professional.

Children are always watching and learning about the world around them. Keeping the lines of communication open is the best way to help our children feel safe and secure enough to continue to learn, thrive, and grow. For additional information about talking to your children, see Handy Handout #46 "Talk to Me: Suggestions for Getting Children to Open Up," and Handy Handout #390 "Helping Children Understand and Deal with Emotions."



Resources:

- "Explaining the News to Our Kids," accessed November 22, 2017, <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/explaining-the-news-to-our-kids>
- "How to Talk to Children About Difficult News," accessed November 21, 2017, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx>
- "How to Talk to Kids About Tragic Events," accessed November 28, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/16/health/talking-to-kids-tragicevents-advice-parents/index.html>
- "How to Talk to Your Child About the News," accessed November 27, 2017, <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/news.html>
- "Talking with Kids About News," accessed November 27, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/>

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