

How Do You Explain Scary News to a Child?

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Watching scary news can leave you speechless and disturbed even as an adult. But how do you explain something like the [war in Ukraine](#), terrorist attacks, [systemic racism](#) or the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) to children without causing trauma?

To help parents and other caregivers tackle this difficult task, this article provides tips and resources on how to discuss complex events with children of all ages in developmentally appropriate ways.

Why Kids Need to Know About Scary World Events

Even though it can be upsetting, there are good reasons why kids should know about potentially scary events. For one, children are exposed to news stories in this digital age anyway — whether it's from seeing headlines on TV or online, overhearing adults talking or learning about events from friends.

Ignoring tough topics won't make them go away. But it can [foster feelings of anger, sadness, and depression](#) in kids if they don't have a reliable source of information and outlet for their feelings.

Children also need to know about current events to participate in our democratic society and become responsible citizens of the world. Here are 3 reasons to explain world events to kids:

- Kids need to learn about the world they live in to make sense of it.
- Hearing about tragic events — happening in other countries, for instance — can help children develop empathy and a [sense of social responsibility](#).
- Well-informed kids can be valuable sources of support and comfort to one another.

But of course, there is a balance to strike here. Parents need to think about how much information to give and how to address sensitive topics in an age-appropriate way.

Helping Very Young Children Cope with Scary News

Even very young kids can understand some basic facts about disturbing events. For example, you can explain to a younger child that there was an earthquake in another part of the world. You don't need to go into detail about the damage it caused or how natural disasters happen.

Supporting Older Children and Teens to Understand Complex Events

Although older children and teenagers may benefit from additional info more than younger children, you should still avoid sharing graphic details or disturbing images.

According to [Dr. Joel L. Young](#), it's always best to ask what the young person already knows and keep the dialogue short and focused on values rather than details of the

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event. “With older children, you can get into deeper discussions of values,” he says, offering the example of the 2017 attack in Charlottesville, Virginia, as an opportunity to discuss racism with older kids.

7 Tips for Talking to Kids About Frightening News

The following tips can help you balance a child’s need to know about current events with their need for a sense of safety.

1. Listen Carefully

Difficult conversations about world events can be a chance to deepen your connection and build trust. Listen carefully and stay calm while the child is talking about what they’ve heard. Pay attention to their emotional state, and give them the space to express fearful feelings.

Adults who listen empathetically can help empower children by validating the truth of their inner thoughts and experiences.

2. Provide Facts and Context

Answer questions honestly, providing facts and context. But don’t say more than the young person needs to know. Depending on the child’s age, you may want to provide basic facts about the frightening event, such as where it took place and what happened.

It’s okay to admit you don’t know the answer to open-ended questions. If that happens, tell the child you will try to find the answer, or research the topic together using child-friendly sources.

3. Limit Access to Graphic News Coverage

To help kids process difficult news in a healthy way, make sure they’re not exposed to graphic images or descriptions. Young children, in particular, can be overwhelmed and disturbed by too much information. Try to stick to child-appropriate news sites such as [Time For Kids](#), and avoid watching television news coverage with young children in the room.

4. Look for the Helpers

The famous children’s TV host [Fred Rogers](#) once said: “When something scary is happening, look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” This can encourage kids to see the positive in a frightening situation.

When you’re talking about tragic events, look for stories of people helping others, and emphasize the importance of compassion. This is not to ignore the seriousness of the situation but to help kids feel like they can still make a difference.

5. Create Safe Space

Offering children a safe place to talk about scary things is key to explaining complicated topics. Provide a comfortable environment where they feel safe and listened to. This could be sitting down together, going for a walk or even talking in the car.

Sometimes the best safety plan is to keep a normal family routine. This can give kids a sense of safety and trust in their immediate surroundings.

6. Address Fears and Anxieties

When a news story is particularly frightening — like a story about natural disasters or violence — it can help to talk about how the situation makes the child feel. This will help normalize their reactions and let them express any fears or anxieties they may have. Encourage kids to share their worries and explain that it’s normal to feel scared, sad or confused when something terrible happens.

7. Take Action Together

Older children could also benefit from an action-based approach to processing and responding to scary news. Taking constructive action together empowers kids and gives them a sense of positive influence in this world. This could mean donating to a

gives them a sense of positive influence in this world. This could mean donating to a charity, writing letters to elected officials or creating art or posters inspired by the event.

Whatever the action may be, doing it together as a family can help foster resilience in children and encourage them to stay hopeful.

Useful Resources for Parents and Caregivers

Check out these resources to help you talk about difficult events with kids and teens:

- Child Mind Institute: [Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)
- American Psychological Association: [Helping Children Manage Distress](#)
- Common Sense Media: [How Young People Are Impacted by the News](#)
- Common Sense Media: [Child-Friendly News Sources](#)

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