

When Bad Things Happen for No Reason

How to Talk to Your Kids about Violence in the News

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“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.” ---Fred Rogers

In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings, and before that the Sandy Hook tragedy, it seems that the world has become a scarier and more dangerous place than ever. How do you even begin to try to make sense of acts that seem so senseless, and how do you explain the whys, hows, and what-ifs to your children?

As middle schoolers, our children are becoming more aware of the world around them. It is harder to protect them from unpleasant or painful information that will teach them the inevitable lesson that the world is a scary place, and not the insulated cocoon you may have created at home. The best thing for them, though, is to be introduced to these realities by you, at home in a controlled environment where you can talk about what happened, what it means to them, and let them ask questions, so that hopefully both of you can try to come to grips with the event and its aftermath. How much do you tell them, without causing them to develop a fear for potential events over which they have no control? “As parents, the best thing we can do to help our kids cope with violent issues is to be available to talk, give reliable and accurate information and instill our family values about the issues.*”

Scholastic.com has an excellent article about how to talk to your children about violence in the news: <http://www.scholastic.com/parents/resources/article/global-awareness/talking-to-your-kids-about-natural-disasters-war-and-violence>

1. **For children younger than age 8**, “it is a wise idea to limit a younger child's exposure to violence on TV in general. If your child seems afraid, acknowledge her very real fears and reassure her that she and the rest of the family are safe. Explain that tragedies like natural disasters or school violence are rare events and that there is very little chance that your hometown will become a battleground. Answer questions honestly, calmly, and clearly, but don't go into unnecessary detail.”

For older children in grades 3-8, the following tips are given:

1. **Watch the news with your child.** “The easiest way to know and monitor what your child is exposed to is to sit down together and watch the news. Find a program that isn't overly sensational (try local news and weekend shows), and talk about what you see . . . just let him comment on the images and stories as they appear. Discussing the news together will also allow you to gauge his reactions and decide whether he seems overwhelmed or if he's okay and wants to learn more.”
2. **Find the Answers Together and Explore More.** “Your child may have questions you don't know the answer to. Instead of making something up or simply saying you don't know, tell her,

‘That's an interesting question. Let's find the answer together.’ Then, when the show is over, open the encyclopedia or search the Internet to explore and research the answer. While you're investigating, give your opinions but don't state them as absolutes, so your child feels comfortable expressing her own feelings, even if they seem to contradict yours.

3. **Keep Up With the News at School.** “Your child's teacher may require the class to follow current events as part of the curriculum, or talk of the news may just be interwoven with peer gossip. Ask him or his teacher about what is being discussed at school. Invite your child to tell you what schoolmates think and feel about current events. Use the microcosm of school to explain the world at large.”
4. **Keep an Open Ear and Mind.** “Be open to listening and answering your child's concerns at all times . . . she may ask a question about the news while you're doing your shopping or are just driving around . . . Inquire why she is worried and if it isn't a convenient time to talk, tell her that you want to talk more about it later. Set a time so you make sure you remember and your child understands that it's important to you to talk with her. Also respect her wishes if she doesn't want to talk at a certain time, and let her know she can revisit the discussion later.”

Other helpful links:

1. *<http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/how-to-be-a-parent/communication/talk-to-kids-violence.shtml>
2. http://childrennow.org/index.php/learn/twk_violence
3. http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-violence-in-the-media_3657148.bc

It's a fine line we walk to impart information to our children without instilling a sense of fear. Reassure your child that they are safe, and that there are many people in their lives to protect them. We need to remind our children of all the good in the world, and limit our focus on the bad.

“In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.”—Fred Rogers