

How to Talk to Your Children About Tragedies in the News

After any tragedy, such as a natural disaster or a terrorist attack, parents and other adults may find it challenging to decide what information to share with children. It is important to consider age and developmental stage in how this information is presented to a child.

For All Ages

A good place to start in discussing a tragic event is by asking what your child has already heard. After you listen carefully, you can ask what questions they have. It is important to be honest about what happened and to focus on the basics. It is not necessary to share every detail, and it is important to avoid speculating about what might happen next. Listen closely to your child for misinformation or underlying fears. Remind your child that you are there for him or her and will keep them safe. A key underlying message for parents to convey is, "It is ok if this bothers you; we are here to support each other."

Young Children

For young children, watching a tragedy on the news can be frightening. News media coverage can include graphic images and sounds. It is best to share information with children by discussing it rather than showing the media coverage. Young children may have more questions about whether they are truly safe and may need help separating fantasy from reality. Some children may become clingy or regress in behavior such as wetting the bed or sucking their thumbs. It is important to be patient and to support your child if he or she reacts in this way.

Older Children and Teenagers

For older children and teenagers, it may be more difficult to avoid exposure to these events in the news. If you want them to see what happened in the news, try to preview it before showing it to them so that you know what to expect and what key points to discuss. Then watch it together. Older children and teenagers may want more information about the tragedy and the recovery efforts. They may have opinions about the causes as well as suggestions to prevent future tragedies or a desire to help those in need.

How to Help Your Child Cope

- Be a calm presence. It is okay for children to see adults be sad or cry, but consider excusing yourself if you experience intense emotions.
- Reassure your child of his or her safety. Consider reviewing your family's plans for responding to an emergency.
- Maintain the routine. To give your child a sense of normalcy, keep up your family's usual dinner, homework, and bedtime routine.
- Spend extra time together. This can foster your child's sense of security. Encourage your child to express his or her feelings.

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- Do something to help. Consider ways that you and your family can help survivors and their families.

Signs That Your Child Might Not Be Coping Well

Some children may have difficulty with these events for a variety of reasons. Some signs that a child is not coping well include sleep problems, physical complaints (eg, feeling tired, having a headache or stomachache, or just feeling unwell), changes in behavior that may include regressive behavior (eg, acting more immature or being less patient), and mental health concerns (eg, sadness or heightened depression or anxiety). Sometimes it can be hard to tell if a child is reacting in a typical way to a tragic event or if there is something else going on. If you are concerned, talk to your child's pediatrician.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Talking to Children About Tragedies and Other News Events
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx>

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