

# HELPING KIDS COPE WITH MEDIA COVERAGE OF WAR AND TRAUMATIC EVENTS

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The intense media coverage that accompanies traumatic events, such as war, acts of terrorism and natural disasters, can be very disturbing. Certain young people are particularly vulnerable and some can be seriously distressed simply by watching replays of such events.

Parents, educators, health practitioners and others who work with kids can help to lessen anxieties arising from the coverage of catastrophic events if they:

- monitor media exposure
- mediate media images and messages, and
- mitigate the media's impact.

## Monitor

### **DON'T ASSUME THAT CHILDREN ARE UNAWARE OF NEWS EVENTS.**

It's almost impossible to be unaware of current events in our information age. Even very young children hear and see more than we think, so it's important to question them about what they have learned and how they're feeling.

### **LOOK FOR SIGNS OF ANXIETY IN CHILDREN.**

Some children are more susceptible to anxiety about events reported in the media. Young children are more likely to be affected by frightening images, while older kids find situations they can imagine themselves

being in more scary. Children are more likely to dwell on certain news events if they themselves have been victims of violence, war or similar tragedies, if they have relatives or friends living in the affected area, or if they have family in the military or in emergency-response professions.

### **BE SELECTIVE IN YOUR MEDIA CONSUMPTION, PARTICULARLY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN.**

Protect kids from intensely disturbing or frightening images. Don't leave the TV or radio on as background noise, don't watch coverage of traumatic events with young children in the room, avoid media "replays" in the days following a catastrophe, turn off Autoplay on video apps, and use parental controls to limit young kids' exposure (see <https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/using-parental-controls-tip-sheet> for how to do this.) At the same time, trying too hard to prevent older children who are interested in news from seeing it can backfire. It's better to teach them how to use content controls themselves and help them access sources of legitimate news that will give them context without showing overly graphic images.

## Mediate

### **HELP CHILDREN TO FEEL SAFE.**

When traumatic events occur, kids need to have the risks to themselves and their families put into a realistic context. If children do not have family or friends affected by the situation, reassure them that these events do not pose a direct threat to them. If they are more directly affected, you'll need to comfort them more directly. Younger children respond best to activities aimed at managing fear and anxiety, including cuddling them, reassuring them that you're there if they need support, putting on a light or preventing them from being exposed to what frightened them again (for example, promising that you'll only watch news after they've gone to bed.) These strategies can still help older kids, but they can also learn strategies to manage their own fears like distracting themselves (reading a calming book, for example), by learning more about the situation, or by taking steps to make themselves feel more active and in control. You can explain how governments and organizations such as the United Nations and UNICEF are working hard to make the world a safer place for all children and talk about ways that your kids can help to make a difference, such as fundraising or volunteering.

### **MAKE THE TIME TO LISTEN TO ANY CONCERNS CHILDREN MAY HAVE.**

Be honest when answering questions. With young children, however, don't elaborate with long, detailed explanations. Some children may ignore news coverage of catastrophes in order to avoid unpleasant

feelings. If they don't want to talk about the events, tell them that's fine. It's okay to just let them be kids. If they have lasting feelings of anxiety, depression or anger as a result of something in the news, help them to get help. Talk to your family doctor or pediatrician about getting access to therapy and make sure your kids know about Kids Help Phone (<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>), a confidential counselling service that youth can access by phone or by text.

### **TELL THEM HOW YOU'RE FEELING.**

Be aware of the impact that traumatic events may have on your own emotions and behaviour. Share your feelings with kids. It helps older kids to know that such events are upsetting to adults as well. Remember, however, that young children may become more fearful if they sense anxiety and tension in the adults around them.

## Mitigate

### **HELP OLDER CHILDREN TO FIND AND ANALYZE MEDIA COVERAGE.**

Use this opportunity to educate kids about how the media work. Watch news coverage with older kids and talk about it. Explain that news is a business and that the need to attract audiences can influence editorial decisions on how events are reported. Teach kids how to use search engines effectively (see this tip sheet: <https://mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/how-search-internet-effectively>) and steer them towards good-quality news outlets.

**EXPAND YOUR SOURCES OF INFORMATION.**

Seek out news coverage from a variety of sources including the internet, newspapers, magazines and radio. Help your kids recognize the signs of a legitimate news outlet, such as a commitment to accuracy, a process for checking facts and limiting bias in coverage, and a willingness to correct mistakes. Compare the coverage by Canadian, American and other international media. Talk about the differences in how various media approach the same event.

**EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF TOLERANCE AND RESPECT.**

Explain that media coverage of world conflicts can trigger powerful feelings of fear and anger in people, which can turn into hate directed at certain groups of people. Explain how negative stereotypes can lead to simplistic and dangerous “good versus evil,” “bad guys versus good guys” perceptions. Point out that peaceful solutions to conflict are always preferable to retaliation and violence.

**EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE THINGS THAT MAY ARISE FROM TRAUMATIC EVENTS.**

Talk about how, after a tragedy like a natural disaster, there is usually a shared outpouring of grief, concern for the victims’ families and admiration for the heroes. Traumatic events can make us pull together and talk about the importance of loved ones and the value of life.