

## TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT THE NEWS

It's important to pay close attention to what children see in the news because studies have shown that kids are more afraid of violence in news coverage than in any other media content. By creating a proper perspective and context for news and current events programs, we can help kids develop the critical thinking skills they need to understand news stories and the news industry.

Here are some tips for helping children to understand and cope with the news.

- **Discuss frightening and disturbing news events with children.** Don't assume they haven't heard about a disturbing news event - ask first and, if they have, discuss it. Talking honestly and reassuringly to kids about traumatic events will go a long way in assuaging their fears. Reassure children by giving them the facts. For example, if children do not have family or friends affected by a frightening news story, 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. See our tip sheet on [Helping Kids Cope with Media Coverage of War and Traumatic Events](#) for more details on how to do that.
- **Understand what news frightens children at different ages.** School-age children are beginning to distinguish fantasy from reality and to worry about real-life dangers. Help them to develop a realistic sense of danger by explaining that traumatic events such as fires, fatal car accidents or plane crashes are rare, which is why they're considered newsworthy. As children get older, the closer an incident is to the reality of their lives, the more disturbing it will be to them. For example, a story about a high-school shooting may be more disturbing to a teenager than a younger child.
- See our tip sheet [Dealing With Fear and Media](#) for more information about what frightens kids at different ages and how to respond.
- **Encourage older children to watch or read the news and discuss current events with you.** It's important that young people understand what is going on in the world and their community. Watch the news with older children and use it as a springboard to discuss difficult topics.
- **Create "teachable moments."** Keep a map or your phone handy to look up countries or areas mentioned in stories to make sure you and your kids understand the issues. Because news items often lack context or thoughtful analysis, search online to get more in-depth information about an issue or a country that kids show interest in. Use our Break the Fake tips (<https://mediasmarts.ca/break-fake>) to make sure that the sources you're using are reliable.
- **Try to find positive news stories.** Call attention to stories that emphasize positive actions and people making a difference - stories about new medical research, peace accords, activism on social or environmental issues and exceptional achievements in sports, the arts or sciences. It's especially helpful to point out news stories about topics that your kids are interested in, whether that's a new dinosaur discovery or who's been cast in their favourite movie series.

- Help them find reliable news sources. Because teens are most likely to hear about news stories from social media, it's important that they know the signs of a legitimate news outlet:
  - a commitment to accuracy. While every news outlet makes mistakes sometimes, frequent errors can suggest that accuracy is not a top priority for them. (Dodging this question by reporting on inaccurate stories spread by other outlets falls under this category as well.)
  - openly retracting and correcting errors. Just as importantly, when an outlet does make a mistake they should be upfront about correcting it.
  - following a story whether or not it supports the outlet's political leanings or bias. News and editorial (where the editorial board publishes opinion or analysis pieces) should be separate: failing repeatedly to cover stories that conflict with their position, or focusing most heavily on stories that agree with it, are signs that bias is influencing the coverage.
  - seeking out and presenting different viewpoints. News outlets have no obligation to amplify hate, harassment or pseudoscience, but in general they should make sure that all sides of an issue are represented.

Make sure they follow reliable news outlets and reporters on their social media feeds, too.

- **Explain the business of news.** News media provide a valuable public service but they are also businesses. They generally sell themselves by being *accurate*, by being *entertaining*, or by being *reassuring* by confirming what you already believe (usually, a mixture of three). Make sure kids understand the differences between news, opinion pieces and analysis articles (which give both facts

and what the writer thinks they mean, but are still supposed to be as objective as possible.) Research has shown that the more people understand how the news industry works, the better they are at distinguishing false news and accounting for bias. To find out how well you understand the news, try our News Quiz (<https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/games/news-you-can-use/>).

- **Discuss bias and framing in the news.** Although most journalists try to be objective and factual in reporting events, there is no such thing as a news story without a point of view, and some biases are harder to perceive because they result from who and what *isn't* included. But bias does not usually work the way people think it does: a news outlet's bias is more often toward its *audience's* views than its owners, and people on both sides of a controversial issue typically see the news as being biased against them. As well, the biggest bias in news is towards what is seen as *newsworthy*—things that are recent, that are unusual, that are relevant to the audience, that are seen as having a big impact, and that happen to an identifiable person or people.

A related question is how a story is *framed*: If police arrest a person with schizophrenia who was creating a disturbance, is it treated as a crime story or a mental health story? Are only the police and eyewitnesses quoted, or are mental health advocates included? Is an election treated as a “horse race” story, about who is ahead in the polls, or does the coverage talk about the candidates' policies and the consequences of one or the other winning? Is the government “easing restrictions” on emissions or are companies “being allowed to pollute”?