



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Helping Kids Cope with Media Coverage of War and Traumatic Events

Prepared by MediaSmarts and Dr. Arlette Lefebvre, Staff Psychiatrist, Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto.

The intense media coverage that accompanies traumatic events, such as war, acts of terrorism and natural disasters, can be very disturbing for children and teens. Certain young people are particularly vulnerable and some can be seriously distressed simply by watching TV 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. Various factors influence children's reactions, including age, temperament, a tendency to worry or a vivid imagination. 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 TV 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, and avoid media "replays" in the days following a catastrophe.



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. While we should be concerned about conflicts in other parts of the world, children need to be reassured that these events do not pose a direct threat to them. 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.

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.

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 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.

Expand your sources of information.

Seek out news coverage from a variety of sources including the Internet, newspapers, magazines and radio. Access alternative media as well as mainstream media outlets. If your children are reading about current events on the Internet, check out the sources of the information to ensure their credibility. 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, 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.

Take action to make a difference.

Gandhi said: "*Be the change you want to see in the world.*" Helping people in your community or another part of the world can help minimize feelings of despair and helplessness. Let children choose their own course of action. They can volunteer at a local food bank, make a donation to a refugee support organization or write a letter expressing their concerns to the local newspaper.

