

# Tragic and Upsetting News Events : Helping Children and Youth Cope



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**Summary:** As adults, we try to provide a safe environment for our children. Even so, the world can still seem like a scary and overwhelming place at times. Children can learn about upsetting news stories through news media and other people, even if they are not directly affected by the events. Children can find these news stories too much to handle, especially because they can't do anything about them. Fortunately, there are many things that parents can do to support children and to help them cope with their fears.

## Christopher's Story, Part 1

Christopher is a 10-year old boy who heard about a recent terrorist attack on the news. Ever since then, he is worried when parents leave the house, and is having trouble sleeping at night. When he expresses his fear, his father tells him not to worry.

His dad reminds him that it's safe in their home, that they have a security system, and that they can call the police if they have trouble. But Chris is still anxious, no matter how much his parents try to reason with him.

## What News Events are Upsetting for Children?

We all want our children to grow up feeling safe. But almost every day, children are exposed to upsetting news events on the radio, television or online.

Upsetting events can include terrorist attacks, school shootings, car crashes, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, war, outbreaks of infectious illnesses or natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and droughts.

Children are also exposed to violence through television shows, movies, and video games. Whether it is through playing violent video games, or our heroes in movies and television, children learn that violence is acceptable. Special effects in video and games are now so realistic, that it is difficult for children to figure out what is real and what isn't. There is research that shows children can become less sensitive to violence by being exposed to it. This may lead to children having less empathy and being more likely to see violence as acceptable.

## How Does an Upsetting News Events Affect Children?

Children are all different. While some children may be quite distressed by such events, others do not seem bothered at all.

Some children may react to hearing about scary events by:

- Crying, expressing fears and needing extra support;
- Worrying about personal safety or the safety of family members;
- Behaving younger (regressing);
- Having trouble coping with any kind of frustration;
- Clinging to parents or caregivers;
- Whining;
- Avoiding certain situations;
- Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep;
- Crawling into bed with parents or caregivers in the middle of the night.

Please remember! Sensitive children are often more easily affected by upsetting news. They feel empathy for others and are often very caring people. These can be powerful strengths.

## What Parents Can Do Every Day: General Strategies

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- **(Continue to) Spend quality time together.** Strong, warm bonds between parents and children are the best 'buffer' between children and a world that sometimes doesn't make much sense. Continue to
  - Ensure you have regular 1:1 time set aside to spend with your child, without distractions. This gives your child a chance to talk and express feelings. You'll have the chance to listen and show that you understand. Reading, playing a game, working on a project, or going for a walk together are all great ways to spend one to one time with your child.
- **Keep your children physically safe.** This means teaching your children without spanking or hitting; and don't allow siblings to get physical with each other. Help them solve their conflicts by talking about their feelings.
- **Keep your children emotionally safe.** A child who feels safe will be generally content and happy, will talk to parents about how he or she feels, and will go to parents with problems or difficult feelings. Emotionally safety includes:
  - Treating children with warmth, affection and age appropriate limits.
  - Keeping expectations that are reasonable and age appropriate.
  - Accepting and validating how your child feels (for example, saying things like "that sounds very sad" as opposed to "How can you feel sad about that? You're making such a big deal out of nothing!")
  - Avoiding telling children they are 'good' or 'bad'. Instead, notice them and what they do. For example: "That was very kind of you to share your cookie." "That is a very tall building you made!" "Hitting is not OK-that hurts Alex when you hit. What can you say to him when he takes your toy?"
  - Dealing with misbehaviour without yelling, in a calm voice. This is not easy for parents to do, but it is crucial for parents to model calmness and how to deal with frustration.
  - Spend time outside. Nature soothes and restores our minds and bodies. An added bonus: children are youth are more physically active when outside.
  - Give children a sense of control by allowing them to make age appropriate decisions. Toddlers can pick clothing from a few options, older children can help plan meals, make more decisions about clothing and help decide on family activities.

## What Parents Can Do: Strategies About News Media

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- **Monitor and limit what your child sees on news media.** Upsetting stories can be too much for children, who can't do anything to change what is happening.
  - Younger children (Age 5 and under) should not watch the news.
  - With older children (age 6 and up), watch the news with them. You'll be able to see what they are watching, and can talk with them about what they see. Keep your TV in a common area, so it will be easier to keep on top of what your children see on TV.
- **Set an example and set limits on TV time.** Limit the time you spend watching the news. Don't have news networks on all the time. Turn off the TV during dinner, and catch up on what's happening with the

people at the table.

- **Reduce or avoid violent television shows or movies.** This may be a challenge, but there is a great deal of high quality programming available for children, though you may have to search a little for it. Nature and science shows are a good option, as is public television programming.

## What Should I do if my Child is Exposed to a Scary News Story?

- **Bring it up yourself.** If you hear about an upsetting news event, it is best to discuss it with your children before they hear it from others. You might say: "The world is a very big place, and from time to time, you might hear people talk about scary things that happened in the news. You can always talk with us if you hear about anything that upsets you."
- **Ask children what they saw or heard.** Start with general questions, like, "What have you heard?" "How do you feel about that?" Later ask more specific questions, like, "Did that make you feel upset?" "Are you worried about that?" "What are you worried is going to happen? What's your worst fear?"
- **Allow children to express whatever feelings they are having, for example, fear, anxiety or sadness.** For example, if your child says that he is frightened, you could respond by saying something like, "I'm glad you told me how you're feeling." It may also help to let your child know that fear is a common reaction. You might say, "A lot of people feel scared when they hear about things like this."
  - It doesn't help for you to 'correct' your child's feelings. Avoid saying things like, "Don't be silly, there's nothing to worry about" or "Big girls (or boys) don't cry, stop being a baby." This can teach children to hide their feelings from you.
  - Crying is, in fact, is very helpful. When children let their feelings out by crying with a supportive adult, their brains learn to adapt to the stress, and are less affected by the stress or worry. This is the same process that adults go through when they grieve a loss by crying. This allows us to work through it and move on. Blocking crying is not helpful.
- **Reassure your child, after she is calm and open to this.** After you have listened and shown that you understand her feelings, your child will hopefully be open to logical explanations and reassurance. For example, you might say "What happened to that family is really scary. It's not likely that this would happen to us, and this is why..." Give your child the facts, appropriate to the child's age.
- **Call attention to the helpers in the situation.** In every emergency or tragedy, there are people rushing to help: police, nurses, firefighters, paramedics, volunteers, doctors, rescuers. This reminds us of the goodness in people, that there are always people willing to help.
- **Take control.** Children often feel helpless when a tragedy or natural disaster occurs. If your child is old enough, look for ways your family can help. Can you help raise money? Volunteer as a family? Support people affected by the events in some way?
- **Stick with usual routines.** Children find comfort in family routines and regular activities.
- **Give your child a sense of control** by teaching them what they can do to be safe in various situations. For example:
  - With COVID: Show them how they can practice physical distancing and wearing a mask.
  - With fires: Practicing fire scape plans; learning how to call 911.
  - With car safety: Using a car seat, booster seat or seatbelt (depending on age and size of child).
  - With head injuries: Wearing helmets for sports
  - With drownings: Learning about water safety
  - With getting lost: Teaching them what to do if they get lost (e.g. staying in a public place with lots of people around, getting help from a store clerk or a family with children)
- **Find some positive meaning and hope out of what has happened.** As the expression goes, if life gives you lemons, try to make lemonade.
  - Event: Demonstrations against police brutality and systemic oppression in the United States.
    - Meaning: "On one hand, it is sad that there is racism in the United States, and it is sad that people have died at the hands of police due to racism. On the other hand, it is a positive thing that people are speaking up and demonstrating together about this. As a result of this crisis, I am hopeful that there will be changes to help fight racism in the United States. And lead to a society where everyone is accepted, no matter what color their skin." Or something like that...

- Event: COVID / Coronavirus quarantine
  - Meaning: "On one hand, it has been very hard for everyone, having to stay home due to the coronavirus. On the other hand, a positive thing is that we've been able to spend more time together, and go for lots of walks together. At the end of the day, it makes me appreciate what is truly important -- our family." Or something like that...

## Christopher's Story, Part 2

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Christopher is a 10 year old who heard about a recent terrorist attack on the news on the television. Ever since then, he has been feeling unsafe He worries when parents leave the house, and is having troubles sleeping at night.

His parents realize that to feel safe, Chris must feel that his own world is a safe place.They come up with the following plan:

- Spend more quality time together. Chris' parents realize that the family has been very busy lately, with work, school and outside activities. They haven't been spending enough time together. They decide they will focus on trying to have more family meals together. To give Chris a better chance to express his feelings, his parents try to find time every day to spend one on one time with Chris. Chris and his mom or dad now spend time before bed reading chapter books together. On the weekends, Chris' parents each try to spend one on one time with Chris, doing activities they like.
- Understand Chris' feelings before reassuring him. When Chris does express his fears, his parents just let him express his anxiety. They simply accept and acknowledge that he feels anxious, instead of jumping to correct his feelings.. "Oh my, you're worried! How difficult that must be... Let me give you a hug..." This allows Chris to express his fears. Feeling that his parents understand and accept him no matter what, he feels safe and connected to his family at a very deep level.

Over time, Chris's fears resolve and things return back to normal...

## When to See a Professional

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You may want to consult with your family doctor or a mental health professional if your child's fears or worries are:

- Causing problems;
- Getting in the way of everyday life;
- Are not getting better.

Consider professionals such as:

- Your child's primary care provider (a family physician or nurse practitioner)
- Your local child/youth mental health agency, or a mental health professional (psychologist, social worker or certified counselor).

## Helpful Websites

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- Common Sense media: Information to help parents assess a range of media to decide if it is appropriate for their child.  
<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>
- Media Smarts: Canadian organization with information and advice on how to use the new digital media.  
<http://www.mediasmarts.ca>
- Behind the News is a website from an Australian news agency which helps children and youth cope with upsetting news  
<http://www.abc.net.au/btn/topic/upsettingnews.htm>

## About this Document

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## Disclaimer

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Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.