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How to Talk to Your Child About the News

News gleaned from the TV, radio, or Internet can be a positive educational experience for kids. But when the images presented are violent or the stories touch on disturbing topics, problems can arise.

Seeing coverage of upsetting events like terrorist attacks, mass shootings, and natural disasters might cause kids to worry that something similar could happen to them or their loved ones. It also can make them fear some aspect of daily life — like thunderstorms — that they never worried about before.

Reports on shootings, attacks, and child abductions also can teach kids to view the world as a confusing, threatening, or unfriendly place.

How can you deal with these disturbing stories and images? Talking to your kids about what they watch or hear will help them put frightening information into a reasonable context.

How Kids Perceive the News

Unlike movies or entertainment programs, news is real. But depending on their age or maturity level, kids might not yet understand the distinctions between fact and fantasy.

By the time kids reach 7 or 8, however, what they see on TV can seem all too real. For some youngsters, the vividness of a sensational news story can be internalized and transformed into something that might happen to them. A child watching a news story about a bombing on a bus or a subway might worry, "Could I be next? Could that happen to me?"

Natural disasters or stories of other types of devastation can be personalized in the same manner. A child in New Mexico who sees a house being swallowed by floods from a hurricane in Louisiana may spend a sleepless night worrying about whether his home will be OK in a rainstorm. A child in Chicago, seeing news about an attack on subways in London, might get scared about using public transportation around town.

TV has the effect of shrinking the world and bringing it into our own living rooms. By concentrating on violent stories, TV news also can promote a "mean-world" syndrome and give kids an inaccurate view of what the world and society are actually like.

Talking About the News

To calm children's fears about the news, parents should be prepared to deliver the truth, but only as much truth as a child needs to know. The key is to be honest and help kids feel safe. There's no need to go into more details than your child is interested in.

Although it's true that some things — like a natural disaster — can't be controlled, parents should still give kids space to share their fears. Encourage them to talk openly about what scares them.

Older kids are less likely to accept an explanation at face value. Their budding skepticism about the news and how it's produced and sold might mask anxieties they have about the stories it covers. If older kids are bothered about a story, help them cope with these fears. An adult's willingness to listen sends a powerful message.

Teens also can be encouraged to consider why a frightening or disturbing story was on the air: Was it to increase the program's ratings because of its sensational value or because it was truly newsworthy? In this way, a scary story can be turned into a worthwhile discussion about the role and mission of the news.

Tips for Parents

Keeping an eye on kids' TV news habits can go a long way toward monitoring the content of what they hear and see. Other tips:

- Recognize that news doesn't have to be driven by disturbing pictures. Public TV programs, newspapers, or newsmagazines specifically designed for kids can be less sensational — and less upsetting — ways of getting information to children.
- Discuss current events with your child regularly. It's important to help kids think through stories they hear about. Ask questions: What do you think about these events? How do you think these things happen? These questions can encourage conversation about non-news topics too.
- Put news stories in proper context. Showing that certain events are isolated or explaining how one event relates to another helps kids make better sense of what they hear. Broaden the discussion from a disturbing news item to a larger conversation: Use the story of a natural disaster as an opportunity to talk about philanthropy, cooperation, and the ability of people to cope with overwhelming hardship.
- Watch the news with your kids to filter inappropriate or frightening stories.
- Anticipate when guidance will be necessary and avoid shows that are too graphic and inappropriate for your child's age or level of development.
- If you're uncomfortable with the content of the news or if it's inappropriate for your child's age, turn it off.
- Talk about what you can do to help. After a tragic event, kids may gain a sense of control and feel more secure if you help them find ways to help those affected by the tragedy or honor those who died.

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