

Monitoring Children's News Exposure in the Aftermath of Trauma

As a tragedy unfolds—a natural disaster, mass act of violence, terrorist attack, or another high-profile event—many of us find ourselves glued to our televisions and phones for the latest news updates. We find it hard to turn away from the real-time coverage, astonishing video, and endless discussions.

In times of tragedy, we seek information to help us make sense of the senseless. We also seek reassurance that we are not in danger and to see if the event has affected people we know. Even when we actively search for news, we can eventually reach the point of emotional and mental overload.

If too much news can overload adults, consider the impact traumatic news can have on children and adolescents.

An average news story or article regularly features quick stories of crime, violence, and personal tragedy. However, when a high-profile traumatic event occurs, the news becomes a nonstop barrage of distressing imagery, alarming headlines, and worrisome language—all of which highlight panic and uncertainty. What is easily overwhelming for adults can be particularly frightening and confusing for children.



How much attention do we think children actually give to the news?

Don't they just ignore it in preference for something more interesting to them?

With today's technology, is it realistic to believe we can shield children from traumatic news?

As adults, it's easy to miscalculate the impact this kind of news has on children and adolescents. We might overlook things we can do to limit their exposure, especially when we need to get information for ourselves.

While the research and debate continue as to the exact extent of prolonged exposure to traumatic news and imagery in children, we can reasonably acknowledge that any traumatic news creates some concern and confusion.

There is no rule as to how much and what type of news children and adolescents should watch and read. It depends on the child and how the news is presented. However, different age groups can have different emotional reactions to traumatic news.

Young Children

Preschoolers have a limited ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. While they may not demonstrate an immediate stress reaction to traumatic news, prolonged exposure may desensitize them. You can use parental controls on televisions or phones to limit access to news channels or websites, and you may want to set a rule that children of this age cannot watch television news without your supervision.

Middle Childhood

Vulnerability to traumatic news increases with middle childhood (e.g., children in elementary and middle school). They can usually identify what's real but lack the perspective needed to properly process it. They might not understand how likely a tragedy is to occur, how close a tragedy is, or the context of an event. Without proper understanding, children can jump to conclusions that increase their worry and anxiety and reduce their feelings of safety and security.

Just as with younger children, you can set parental controls to limit access to certain news channels or websites. Some television channels and websites offer kid-friendly news sources that are age-appropriate. It can also be helpful to watch or read the news with children at this age so you are aware of the information and can help answer any questions. This is a great opportunity for open dialogue to give the event context and to reassure children about their safety.

Adolescents

Adolescents have easier access to news and a broader perspective, however, you should check in with them to listen to their thoughts and feelings about news events. This can be a good opportunity to address tough issues, talk about right and wrong, reinforce the values and morals that your family holds, and provide guidance on an appropriate response and perspective.

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