

Talking to Your Child About Unsettling Current Events

Objective

To identify age-appropriate ways to discuss current events with your child and to plan time to process these events with them.

What to Know

From global conflicts to mass shootings to natural disasters, it seems there is always at least one scary story in the news. Children hear about current events through social media, friends, or adult conversations. Even if they are unaware of exactly what is happening, they can often sense something is going on based on how the adults around them are behaving. Your child may worry about what is happening in the world, and they probably need you to help them make sense of these unsettling times. You can address your child's concerns and help them process difficult information by following these suggestions.

1. Think about (and limit) news exposure. Be aware of how much the television or other news outlets are on. Images in the news can be upsetting and unhelpful to young children who do not have the emotional maturity to understand what they are seeing. Notice how often you discuss the news in front of your kids. Pay attention to what they are seeing on their devices.

2. Talk about current events. Dedicate time to talk every day. With everything that has happened in the world and the popularity of social media, children are constantly exposed to negative news, which can have a traumatizing and numbing effect. If you avoid talking about it, they will get their information from somewhere else.

3. Ask open-ended questions. Let your child lead the conversation. You might ask, "What do you know about what's happening? Have you seen or heard anything? How do you feel about that? What does that make you think about? Do you have any questions?" Then, listen to what they have to say. Correct misinformation. It is OK if you do not know all the answers. Look up information together if your child is old enough or let them know you will do your best to find out.

4. Be age appropriate. Discuss issues in an understandable way. Use age and developmentally appropriate language. Be mindful of your wording and what your child can process. For example, instead of telling a very young child that someone was "shot," simply say some people were "hurt." You can ask your child's teacher for resources they may recommend. Speak honestly but filter the information you share based on your child's age and what they can understand.

5. Validate feelings. Explore and normalize your child's feelings about scary things they have seen or heard about. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and share your own. If you are willing to talk about difficult and scary topics, they will learn to do so, too. You might say, "I'm feeling very upset right now, and I'm worried for the people impacted by what happened."

6. Reassure them they are safe. Correct any misperceptions or unjustified fears about safety. Tell your child that despite scary things that are happening, they are safe and protected. Reassure them in a realistic way. You might say, “You’re safe here at home, and my job as your parent is to keep you safe.”

7. Create teachable moments. Explain your family’s beliefs about current events and healthy ways to handle things. For example, when a violent incident occurs, you could say there are more appropriate ways to express anger that do not involve harm to others or destruction of property.

8. Focus on the positive. Point out the helpers. Talk about people in the community who act as a force for good during tragic or scary events. The news can be a springboard for your family to get involved in causes that matter to you.

9. Follow your child's lead. If your child seems disinterested or does not want to talk about it, avoid pushing them. Do not offer more details than your child is interested in.

10. Help your child feel in control. Even if your child cannot control an event—like a natural disaster—it can help them feel a bit in control to share their fears with you. Talk about what you can do to help. After a tragic event, find ways to help to give your child a sense of control. Perhaps you can donate clothing, or volunteer for a local organization.

11. Teach your child to be prepared, not panicked. If a natural disaster is in the news, make a family plan for what you might do. Discuss ways to protect yourself and others from illness.

12. Put news stories in context. Broaden the discussion from a specific news item to a larger conversation, like helping others, cooperating, and coping with hardship.

13. Monitor stress. If your child exhibits behavior changes (such as sleeping or eating problems, or worrying all the time), call your child's doctor or a counselor.

This worksheet will help you plan time to discuss current events with your child using the suggestions outlined above.

Reflections on This Exercise

In what ways did having conversations about current events effectively address your child's concerns?

What conversations were most beneficial for you and your child?

What surprised you?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
