

MAKING THE GRADE

Dealing with Sensitive Topics in the News



Children have many opportunities to be exposed to the news ... snacking in front of the television while dinner is being made, reading the headlines while getting ready for school, or listening to the radio while riding in the car. In addition, news flashes may interrupt the program they are watching or they may cruise the Internet and come across Web sites highlighting the latest news.

Used properly, the news can teach children many positive things about the world. Knowledge and understanding of news events can give children a sense of belonging and teach social responsibility. Yet, the news also can introduce tough issues such as violence, disease, poverty, death, terrorism and war.

To help give children perspective, parents may want to talk often with them about the stories and images they are exposed to on a daily basis. This tabloid focuses on how parents can help their children understand how the media works and strategies for using the media to discuss sensitive topics.



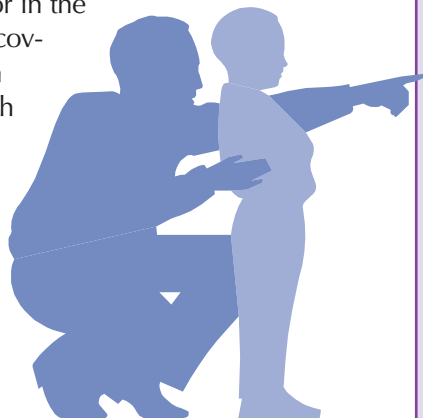
DEALING WITH TROUBLING NEWS

On Sept. 11, 2001, parents were hit with a dilemma – a terrorist attack had just occurred at a major city in the United States. It was on every major television channel. It was on all the radio stations. You stopped at the grocery store and people in the checkout line were discussing the latest news. Even in your child's classroom at school other students were talking about it. As parents, how much information should you discuss with your child?

As adults, we depend on the news to keep us informed of the events occurring around us. Yet when a tragic event occurs, the amount of news we receive can be overwhelming. But for our children, it also can be confusing and frightening.

When used properly, the news can teach children many positive things about the world. It can help them understand the importance of social responsibility. Many literacy programs encourage parents and their children to read the newspaper together to develop language skills and healthy reading habits.

Because tragic events in the news can frighten, confuse and anger children and reinforce stereotypes they hold, parents should discuss with their children the stories that are covered on radio, television or in the newspaper. By discussing the events and issues covered in the news, parents can help their children gain a better understanding of the world in which they live. Building good communication with your child becomes even more important as children grow older and are making more of their own decisions about television shows they watch, movies they see, and news they read and hear.



HOW THE NEWS WORKS

Children need to understand how the news works. Newspapers and other media budget their space and time. For example, newspaper editors discuss the stories and decide which to include and where to place them in the newspaper. Copy editors write headlines. On any given day, have your children analyze the news. Ask them which stories they'd place on the front page and whether certain stories deserved the attention they received. You can also have them write their own headlines.

In choosing stories, media take several factors into account. Parents and children can discuss why they think certain stories were chosen. Are they important, timely, or unique? Are the people prominent? Does the story have emotional appeal? Does the story tell of progress? Do the events take place close to home?

Some stories focus on events that are unusual or don't occur regularly. For example, a bridge collapse, an earthquake or a puppy being rescued from an abandoned well. These events bring out strong emotional reactions in the reader or viewer.

A single story rarely gives the complete picture. Stories develop and are reported as they happen. Deadlines and time and space limitations affect the amount of information provided on a given day. As a result, readers or viewers may hear only part of the story from early news accounts. Parents and children should follow stories over time to get as complete a picture as possible and use as many sources as possible to compare the different news media and their approaches to the story. On some occasions, they may be able to talk directly with people who are part of the story. By following a story as it develops and using a variety of media, parents will help develop their children's interest in the world around them and their ability to analyze news accounts.

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT SENSITIVE NEWS TOPICS

It's pretty easy to talk with your children about their favorite sport or what items they'd like on their pizza. But what if the topic is a little more sensitive such as bullying or drugs or sex?

Although we may personally find these topics a little uncomfortable, it's important that we lay the groundwork for open, honest communication.

Children Now* in its article, "Talking with Kids," offers the following suggestions for talking with children about sensitive issues:

SEX

News stories provide the perfect opening for talking with your children about sex. Kids who feel they can talk with their parents about sex are less likely to engage in risky behaviors as teens. An uncomfortable news moment could lead to a great discussion about puberty, peer pressure or even love. Make sure you share your values about sex with your child.

DRUGS

News stories of increased drug usage by children or a story on why some schools require students to have parental permission before they can take an aspirin can provide the perfect opportunity to discuss the issue of drugs with your children. Explain the difference between legal and illegal drugs and what to do if someone offers them drugs.

RACE

Children can get their first glimpses of racial stereotypes from the news and other media. It's important to talk with your children about race, especially when you see generalizations and stereotypes. A good way to start a conversation on race is by talking with your child about what respect means and how to be respectful of all people regardless of race, religion, age or any other characteristic.

ACCIDENTS/DISASTERS

Let your children know the facts about disasters they may read or hear about. Simply because we see these things on the news or read about them doesn't mean they happen all the time. Even when the disaster happens closer to home, talk about things we can do to protect ourselves and come up with a plan on what your family will do in the event of an emergency.

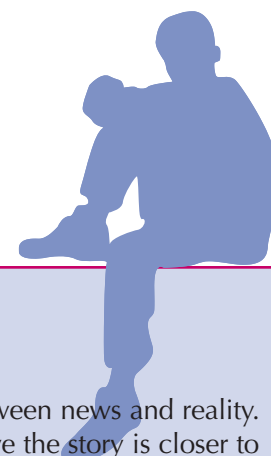
SICKNESS/DISEASE/DEATH

Using a news story to initiate a conversation on AIDS or meningitis is a great way to find out what your children know about the disease and gauge how much this topic frightens them. Let your child know the realities of these diseases and how to avoid risk factors. This may require additional research, but if you are able to relieve your child's anxiety, it will be worth it. Death can also be a difficult topic to discuss with your child. Yet helping them understand death may arm them with the skills they need to cope and grieve effectively when someone they love dies. It's important for children to understand that love never ends even if the person is no longer living.

DIVORCE

Divorce is a common item in the news. It's important for children to understand that even though some couples who argue do end up getting divorced, it doesn't mean that every time their parents argue they are thinking about getting divorced. Let your children know that when divorce happens, both parents still love and will continue to love their children.

*Children Now, an independent, nonpartisan research and action organization whose strategies are designed to improve children's lives, in collaboration with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and the Advertising Council, created the Talking with Kids series. This national campaign encourages parents and other caring adults to start early with conversations which may be difficult, but which can change the course of a child's life.

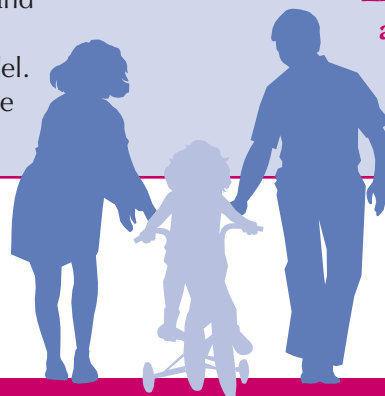


Top 10 Tips for Talking with Your Children About the News

Children Now*, in its series, "Talking with Kids About News," offers parents the following 10 tips for talking with their children about the news:

- 1 Explore the age appropriateness of the news you allow your children to see or read. Parents of preschoolers (children under age 6) are strongly encouraged to not allow their children to watch the news unsupervised. Children between the ages of 6 - 10 should watch the news with their parents. Parents should help children in this age group develop a realistic sense of danger and limit their exposure to gruesome reviews of crime and injury. Parents of children aged 11 and up can't be expected to monitor everything their child views, reads or hears. However, they can talk with their children about what they are reading or hearing and clarify any misunderstandings.
- 2 Watch or read the news with your children. A great way to alleviate the fear and confusion of the news is to share the experience with your child.
- 3 Create an open dialogue. The best way to make sure children know they are safe is to talk with them about what they read and hear. Let your child know that they don't have to be afraid or ashamed to talk with you whenever they see something they don't understand. When they ask questions, use the opportunity as a "teaching moment."
- 4 Share your feelings about the news you see. As a parent, you can be the first person to instill in your child your sense of values and moral principles. Ask your child why some individuals get attention and whether the attention results from good or bad behavior. Ask your child which behaviors match those of a positive role model. You may want to have your child cut out news stories of people making positive contributions.
- 5 Let your children know the difference between news and reality. The news media can lead people to believe the story is closer to home than it actually is or that tragedies happen more often than they actually do in real life.
- 6 Acknowledge your child's fears. It's important to reassure a child that there are people working to make sure his or her personal world will be safe.
- 7 Explore the facts with your child. At times it may be necessary to provide more factual information than is provided in a news report.
- 8 Acknowledge the complexity of the news. It's important that, as parents, we let our children know that the news and the world are very complex, and that greater perspective will come with age and continued communication.
- 9 Select kid-friendly news sources for your child. There are news sources created just for children that explain issues children care about in a way they can understand. For example, some newspapers include the "Mini Page" as a supplement and Nickelodeon offers "Nick News" to report on issues children care about. There also are a number of Web sites and magazines dedicated to news for kids.
- 10 Balance your child's news diet. Just as you are selective about the foods your child eats, be selective about the amount and sources of news for your child. Know how your child receives news; then set limits.

Experience the news with your child, and balance his or her news exposure by talking about what he or she sees, reads and hears.



LOOKING FOR THE POSITIVE IN THE NEGATIVE

We've all heard the familiar phrase, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!" As parents, we can and should take a similar approach with the news by helping our children look for the positive whenever they can.

It seems like all we read and heard following the tragic events of Sept. 11, were stories dealing with death, destruction, and vengeance. Yet, there also were a number of human-interest stories that surfaced in the moments, days and weeks following the terrorist attacks.

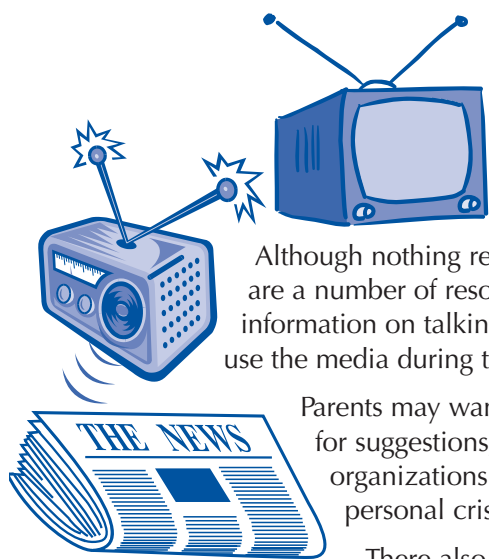
The events of Sept. 11 offer excellent examples of how good news can be found anywhere. The stories about the heroic firefighters and police officers who risked – or even gave – their lives to help rescue others show youngsters and their parents that examples of the best in human nature can be found in the most terrible events.

Last fall, we read stories about the rescue workers and citizens working side-by-side, 24-hours a day, sifting through the rubble by hand. Local

restaurants and businesses donated food and supplies and provided a place to rest. Thousands of Americans donated blood – many for the first time – and citizens from the very young to very old participated in fundraisers or sent money to help with the relief efforts.

There are similar responses when there are reports of a plane crash, a train derailment, house fire or natural disaster. It's important that we point out these heroes who abound in nearly all situations.

Everyday heroes far outnumber those individuals bent on destruction. The best thing that parents can do is focus their children's attention on the acts of kindness and generosity reported in the news. They should use newspapers and other media to talk with children about positive role models, people who devote themselves to service and take risks to help and rescue others.



For more information...

Although nothing replaces the training and skill that counselors can offer, there are a number of resources available for parents who would like additional information on talking with your children about sensitive topics and how to use the media during times of crisis.

Parents may want to contact their school system's student services' director for suggestions, advice and/or materials. Many counties have Hospice organizations that can provide or lend materials to families dealing with personal crisis.

There also are a number of Web resources available to parents such as:

- **American Counseling Association**
www.counseling.org/tragedy/tragedy.htm
- **National Association of School Psychologists**
www.nasponline.org
- **US Department of Education**
www.ed.gov/inits/september11/index.html
- **North Carolina Department of Public Instruction**
www.ncpublicschools.org/school_improvement/crisis_resources.html
- **Purdue Extension: Knowledge to Go**
www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/children/index.html
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**
www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/index.htm
- **Talking with Kids**
www.talkingwithkids.org/
- **Prepare Respond Recover**
www.preparerespondrecover.com/childrensneeds/strategies.html

Dealing with Sensitive Topics in the News is one in a series of publications produced by North Carolina Newspapers in Education with support from the North Carolina Press Association and the Public Schools of North Carolina (State Board of Education/Department of Public Instruction). Watch for other tips for helping your child during the coming months.



North Carolina Newspapers in Education

NC Press Foundation
5171 Glenwood Ave., Ste. 364
Raleigh, NC 27612
www.ncpress.com



Public Schools of North Carolina

301 N. Wilmington Street
Raleigh, NC 27601-2825
phone: 919-807-3300
www.ncpublicschools.org