

TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT THE NEWS

Talking about the news with kids happens in everyday moments. Children ask questions in the car on the way to school, in between pushes on the swings, and just when you're trying to rush out the door. In one breath, they'll ask about a range of topics — from the weather to the president to the latest war. And when difficult questions come up, parents wonder how to respond.

To help the conversation along, this article offers flexible suggestions for answering kids' questions about the news. There is no script to follow but these strategies can help you tune in to what your child is thinking and feeling and talk it through together.

Start by finding out what your child knows. When a news topic comes up, ask an open-ended question to find out what she knows like "What have you heard about it?" This encourages your child to let you know what she is thinking.

Ask a follow up question. Depending on your child's comments, ask another question to get him thinking, such as "Why do you think that happened?" or "What do you think people should do to help?"

Explain simply. Give children the information they need to know in a way that makes sense to them. At times, a few sentences are enough. "A good analogy is how you might talk about sex," adds Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Ed. D. "You obviously wouldn't explain everything to a 5-year-old. Talking about violence and safety is similar."

Listen and acknowledge. If a child talks about a news event (like a local robbery or kidnapping) and is worried, recognize her feeling and comfort her. You might say "I can see you're worried, but you are safe here. Remember how we always lock our doors." This acknowledges your child's feelings, helps her feel secure, and encourages her to tell you more.

Offer reassurance. When a child is exposed to disturbing news, she may worry about her safety. To help her calm down, offer specific examples that relate to her environment like, "That hurricane happened far away but we've never had a hurricane where we live." Actions speak louder than words — so show your child how you lock the door if she gets

scared by a news report about robbers, point out the gutters and storm drains if a hurricane story causes fear, and explain what the security guards do at the airport after a story about terrorists.

Tailor your answer to your child's age. The amount of information children need changes [age by age](#). "A kindergartner may feel reassured simply knowing a hurricane is thousands of miles away. An older child may want to know how hurricanes could affect the place where he lives and may want to know what is being done to help those in need. Both ages will be reassured by doing something to help," notes Jane Katch, M.S.T., author of *They Don't Like Me: Lessons on Bullying and Teasing from a Preschool Classroom*.

AGE BY AGE INSIGHT

At every age and stage, children are affected by what's happening in the news, whether parents share this information or shield them from it — because the news is everywhere.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Study, today's families are watching a lot of TV. 65% of today's children live in homes where the TV is on half the time, and in 36% of homes, the TV is on all the time. This study also points to research stating that TV in the background has an impact on children because "the content is not designed for them."

How many hours a day children are watching the news has not been definitively researched, but news exposure is clearly having an impact. Even if parents keep the TV news off around young children (as experts recommend) the news can still be seen at the supermarket, in a doctor's waiting room, or at a friend's house. Therefore it's not surprising that teachers are reporting that children as young as five are talking about the news — and see news events reflected in their play at school.

Because the news has saturated our daily lives, experts recommend you develop age-appropriate ways to talk about it with kids. While these conversations will be somewhat limited with younger children, experts recommend that you discuss the news in a more detailed way with older children. To help out, this article offers age-customized pointers for discussing the news with suggestions on how much (or how little) news they should be watching.

BABIES & TODDLERS 0-2

What They Understand about the News

Babies and toddlers should not be exposed to disturbing news. Even though they may not understand the words, they will react to visual and audio stimulation. They will also pick up on your feelings about what you see on the news, and react to your emotional state.

Babies and toddlers may be drawn to the sounds and images on the news even if the TV is on in the background. If toddlers see the news, they make think the events on TV are happening to them.

Signs of Stress

If babies and toddlers sense that you are upset by the news, they may become upset as well. You may notice them get fussier, have lengthy crying bouts and even resist being comforted. They might have a loss of or big increase in appetite, and regress in their toileting or other developmental milestones.

Media Recommendations

Don't expose children under 2 to TV news. Babies will not understand images on TV but will be aware of your reactions.

Loud noises (such as gun shots on the news, in violent TV dramas, and real life), big flashes, angry voices or angry-looking people on TV may startle or scare toddlers.

"Leave the room with your toddler or turn off the TV if images could be potentially upsetting to either of you," recommends Susanna Neumann, Ph.D.

Calming Strategies

Use soothing tones when you talk, and give more cuddling and hugs — particularly if your baby seems affected by your feelings. Be patient if your child shows changes in patterns of eating, sleeping or toileting.

From Wonderful Resources at:

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/index.html>

PRESCHOOLERS 3 – 5

What They Understand about the News.

Preschoolers often mix up fact with fantasy. If they see a war on TV and you tell them it's very far away, they generally don't understand what "far away" means. It could be as far as the mailbox on the corner, the post office a few blocks away, or Grandma's house in the next town! And when they see disturbing events on TV, they may even think they're happening right there in the house.

Young children take words very literally, which may present problems since the news is filled with nuances. "After the Columbine shooting, one child in my class thought his mother's garden, which was filled with columbine flowers, was dangerous. Another, hearing news of a heart attack, was afraid something would attack his heart," recalls teacher Jane Katch, M.S.T.

Signs of Stress

While preschoolers may not comprehend exactly what happens on the news, if it is disturbing news they can still be acutely aware that something is wrong and feel their parents' anxiety.

If they are exposed to violence on the news, some preschoolers may become more anxious, have nightmares, change their eating habits or fear being away from their parents. Others may show no signs of stress at all but still be affected. "Don't wait for concrete signals. Assume situations like these are stressful for preschoolers," says Susanna Neumann, Ph.D.

Media Recommendations

Preschoolers generally view TV as a magic window into the world and have trouble separating television images from their daily lives. Like babies and toddlers, preschoolers will focus on sights and sounds such as bombs, guns and loud noises.

Shield preschoolers from news coverage of violent events whenever possible. Young children often think what they see on TV is happening in the here and now. Turn off your TVs and radios when young children are in the room. (You might offer favorite music instead.) If young children do see violence on the news, remind them it is only a picture

on the TV. You might say, "This happened many, many miles away. You are safe."

Avoid repeated viewings of the same event. Your child may think it's happening again. "After 9/11, children who saw multiple news reports often thought more buildings were falling down, again and again," reports Diane Levin, Ph.D.

Communication Strategies

It's not necessary to discuss violent events on the news, unless you know your preschooler has been exposed to them. If you're aware of this or observe changes in her behavior, you probably should discuss the news event in age-appropriate ways. Changes to look for might include increased interest in war-related play — pretending blocks are missiles, for instance — or behavior that is out of character with your child, such as increased difficulty with separation or trouble going to sleep.

However, it is useful to discuss news that is connected to your preschooler's life. "The news is a way of learning about the world, so early discussion about your young child's experiences in the world sets the stage for more in-depth discussions as your child gets older," says Diane Levin, Ph.D. "These discussions can come out of day-to-day activities you do together. "Talk about the weather outside and then watch the weather report or listen to it, talk about an election when you take your child to the polls, and talk about recycling as you put the cans out together."

If your child has a question, ask what she knows in an open-ended way. You might ask, "What do you know about that?" and then answer your child's question in an age-appropriate way. "Finding out what your child understands about what she has seen or heard will help guide your response. It's not just the fears you want to deal with, you may want to clear up confusions and misconceptions that may be scaring your children. You don't need to over-explain in ways that are not age-appropriate but you do want to clear up the confusion," advises Diane Levin, Ph.D.

Explain that you are safe. When children hear or see a scary event on the news, they often relate it to themselves and may feel directly threatened. Reassuring your child that he is safe and that this news is not happening here should help him feel secure. Reviewing and maintaining routines can be comforting as well. For example, you might explain what time you will be home, who will pick your child

up from school and what your plans are for the weekend.

Provide art materials, blocks, dolls, and stuffed animals. Playing with these objects will help your child explore what she feels. In a response to a specific news story, offer related props for the play. (Provide toy cars if your child talks about the police cars on the news or in the neighborhood, for example.)

Snuggle and cuddle. As you would with an even younger child, offer lots of cuddling and hugs, and be patient and sensitive to changes in patterns of eating, sleeping and toileting.

Listen carefully. Find out what your child has to say about the news. There is no "right way" of thinking about a topic and your young child will interpret it differently than you. So listen to what he says and base what you say on his interpretation, not your own.

SCHOOL AGED 6-8

What They Understand about the News

School-age children experience a shift in thinking about news and current events. They not only have questions about "What is happening in MY world," but also begin to ask, "What is happening in THE world?" However, this shift in thinking is gradual and each child will make this transition in his own way.

While school-age children do begin to understand events in context, they often understand them one piece at a time and become scared by what they see and hear. For example, a child may know, intellectually, that the police car speeding by with flashing lights and its siren blaring isn't going to do anything to him, but he may still duck. This is because his intellectual awareness is not integrated with his emotional response, and he still feels scared.

As school-age children become ready to understand events in the news, this becomes a time for limited media exposure and good follow-up discussions, "A child might ask questions about news she heard in school or might ask to watch something on the news. These are signs that a child is ready for some limited exposure," notes Jane Katch, M.S.T.

Signs of Stress

When exposed to disturbing events on the news, some children this age may have nightmares and act out aggressive behaviors at home or school. While some remain unaffected by disturbing news, others may become clingy and have trouble saying goodbye, lose interest in schoolwork, or complain about stomachaches or fatigue. Others may become rowdy at school or have angry outbursts at home.

At this stage, children view the news in personal terms. In reaction to a local news story about a shooting, school-age children might imagine that this could happen to them. After hearing a news report about kidnappers, a child might have trouble sleeping because he fears a kidnapper could take him out of his room.

"Some children may develop peculiar or unusual rituals or even phobias in reaction to seeing violent events on the news," says Susanna Neumann, Ph.D. "I treated a child who couldn't wear a red shirt after seeing a violent attack on TV. We discovered that the color red reminded him of the blood. This does not mean that children this age should be shielded from all news. Instead, parents should be aware how much children can be affected by the news they see."

Media Recommendations

Most children between 6 and 8 are not ready for full exposure to TV and radio news reports. Turn off your TVs and radios when truly disturbing news is played.

Limited exposure is recommended. Listening to or reading the news selectively with your child encourages him to gain an understanding of events. Discuss significant news stories such as the Sandy Hook shooting or Hurricane Sandy with your school-age children, in developmentally appropriate ways. "You might listen to or read about these events in limited doses, together. Whether you like it or not, your school-age child is likely to find out about news from other friends at school. And your school-age child is also becoming developmentally ready to understand these events. That's why age-appropriate viewing and discussion are recommended."

Listen to the news instead of watching it. For this age group, experts do recommend reading about or listening to the news over watching graphic images on TV. "The problem is you don't know what images will be on TV news, so having conversations with children about events in the news or looking at newspapers

with them is probably safest," adds Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Ed. D. co-author of *The War Play Dilemma*.

Communication Strategies

Discuss important news with your school-age child. It's recommended that you DO bring up the subject of war, violence, and environmental disasters on the news with your older child. This is particularly important if you know your child has been (or is likely to be) exposed to some disturbing events on the news.

Find out what your child knows already. You might initiate a conversation by saying, "Have you heard anything about the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut or Hurricane Sandy?" or "Are people saying anything at school about the violence at that shopping mall?" If your child says "Yes," talk about what she knows, and answer her questions with age-appropriate information. On the other hand, if your child says "No," you might say "well if you hear about it and want to discuss it, let me know" or describe the event in an age-appropriate way, depending on the circumstances.

Reassure your child that he is safe. Some kids will ask about how news events relate to them, in very specific ways. Others may express concerns about their parents' and family's safety, and adults need to respond in very specific terms, being honest but not discussing every detail. Describe all the things that are being done to keep everyone safe — the guards at the airport, the police on the street, the fire fighters at a fire.

Don't over-correct or over-explain. School age children will often construct "versions of the truth" in their retelling of an incident. It's not necessary to tell them they are wrong and correct them, unless their version will cause them extra concerns.

Follow the news with your child. To help kids stay connected to the world and learn about their place in it, experience it together. Read on the web or newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch TV news (but be selective!). Monitoring the news together and discussing it helps a child follow a cycle of events, such as elections, sports, weather, and environmental changes.

Encourage your child to learn more. If your child shows interest in a particular issue, you might suggest

she research it further. Expose your child to a variety of types of sources. Go beyond daily news by reading web sites, history books and magazines. "This research should grow out of your child's interests, not from an adult-imposed agenda. This process can also be an opportunity to talk about how people are working in the world to solve a problem on the news and to ask your child what he might do about it," adds Diane Levin, Ph.D.

OLDER KIDS 9-11

What They Understand about the News

Older children begin to think more logically about events in the news but still relate them to themselves. While they don't think abstractly the way adults do, they begin to understand more complex ideas and like to examine problems of all kinds. Their insights can be amazingly deep. However older kids still rarely see the whole picture. They start to look at causes for events and ask more challenging questions but don't always put together their conclusions in a logical or adult way.

"Once children begin to become capable of logical thinking, they are also able to see the contradictions between what is actually happening and what adults say about it — for instance, adults telling them not to fight or hurt other people at home or school when countries fight in wars and terrorists use bombs," says Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Ed. D. "Some children will bring it up and be confused or mad about it and some will be critical of adults for letting bad things happen and not making them better."

Older children can still be prone to misconceptions about news events. Some create their own versions of what happened and this misinterpretation spreads as "news" in school. When this happens, you can respectfully help kids clear up these misconceptions without making them feel "wrong."

Signs of Stress

Older grade-schoolers can become stressed about news events because they are not able to fully understand them and are hearing "half-truths" from their friends. Like younger children, they may still get scared about their safety. Although older kids are more capable of discussing these fears than younger ones, they are sometimes less willing to do so. When they do ask questions, they usually want more

detailed and logical explanations. Older kids begin to realize that their parents can't make everything better and things do happen beyond their control.

When extremely stressed by scary events in the news, older kids often revert to younger kid behaviors — they may cry easily, have tantrums, and have trouble sleeping. Some will get sillier and hyperactive; others may shut down and feel like everything is "futile."

While older kids' discussions of news events can be complex, these kids can still have nightmares and unconscious reactions to events like deaths of political leaders, wars, and community violence.

Media Exposure

Provide regular exposure to the news, within appropriate limits. Listen to news on the radio and put out the newspaper for your child to read. Allow your older child to watch "some" TV news as well. To get kids regularly engaged, talk about a news topic that interests them. You might discuss a topic they're studying in school or places they have visited. Think of stories that are meaningful and have some connection to your child.

Watch the news with your older child. Find some time to listen to, watch, read, and discuss the news together. However keep in mind that it's still not appropriate for kids this age to watch news coverage non-stop, even when a crisis is occurring. "When watching the news, kids this age pick up on the panic button stuff," reports teacher Paige Williar. "That's why you don't want to leave them alone while they watch it. You need to help them understand the whole story."

Be aware that interest levels may vary. Some kids this age will express great interest in the news, while others will not, unless their friends are talking about news events.

Communication Strategies

Developmentally, kids this age are engaging in more sophisticated conversations, but many are less communicative with their parents than they are with their friends.

Find out what they know. You might start a conversation about the news the same way you would with 6 - 8 year-olds, by asking what your child knows and what other kids at school are saying about a

particular event. But where you can go in the discussion next expands as you take your cues from what your child tells you.

Don't over-explain. Be aware that you still don't have to explain every detail, but do want to discuss what is important. You might express your feelings about an event, while leaving room for your child to form his own.

For example, if an older child says, "Did you hear about the shooting in the next town?," you might explain what you know (briefly) and ask, "What did you hear?" If your child says, "I heard someone shot the person who owned a store," you might comment on why that's sad, describe how we are safe at home and then see where your child takes the conversation.

Allow kids their own opinions. Older kids can be very vocal about news events. Some may get angry and ask why "those stupid idiots" are going to war and killing innocent people. Others may start talking about how they would retaliate if they were in charge and become adamant supporters of a military action or political cause. In response, you might ask questions about what they think, and why, without making them wrong.

Use this discussion as an opportunity for growth and understanding. While the older child may still need soothing if he's scared, this is a chance to introduce a thoughtful analysis of what's happening. It's also an age when kids start to do things about the events that concern them. "This conversation can become a jumping off point to study the issue more or to take constructive actions. They want to feel their voices are heard and valued. It can be reassuring for them to start to take constructive action themselves, for example to get involved in local efforts to aid victims of war and violence or provide relief to victims of a natural disaster," says Diane Levin, Ph.D.

See more on Work it Out Through Play and Conversation Starters at:

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/index.html>