

How to talk to your children about world news



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This article was written by a Qwell mental health writer and contains the following themes: world news and parenting.

Note: While this article is aimed at parents and carers, it might also be useful for grandparents, other close relatives, teachers, and any other important person in a child's life.

It can be difficult to know how to talk to children about the frightening things happening in the world. From war to natural disasters, climate concerns to crime, navigating big topics can be tough. It can be especially difficult to have these conversations and answer questions when we are trying to make sense of our own thoughts and feelings, too.

As parents and carers, even if we try to shield our children from extreme or worrying news stories, we can't protect them from everything, especially as they get older, have more access to technology, and are less dependent on the adults around them.

We realise that all families are different, so we wanted to share a range of tips on how you can talk to your children about the news and the feelings that might come up as a result.

To help us with this, we spoke to some parents, Geri, Serge, Lara, and Ray*, who have children of different ages and emotional needs.

*These names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.



Here are our top tips on how to talk to your children about the news:

#1. Get some context about what your children know.

First, figuring out what your children know and how they feel can be useful, so that you can respond thoughtfully to what they need, rather than making assumptions on what they might be thinking and feeling, or on what they have already seen, read, or heard.

It can be helpful to remember that all children are different - even when they are from the same family. So, just because one child feels a certain way, doesn't mean that their siblings will feel the same.

“I have twins who couldn't be more different. So, finding out what they know and how they're feeling is so helpful for me. One of them is really affected by negative news stories, and the other one, not so much. But checking this out with them helps them to express themselves freely if they want to, and it helps me know what areas they might need some support with.” - Geri

TOP TIP: Asking open questions like “Tell me what you've heard/seen/read about?”, rather than closed questions like “Are you scared by the news?” (and other questions that typically have a yes/no response), is a good way to give your child the freedom to give an honest answer with more information if they want to share.

#2. Think carefully about what feels appropriate for them.

How you talk to your children about world news might depend on their age, emotional development, and other factors. There's a big difference between what you might talk about with a nine-year-old versus a fifteen-year-old.

For example:

- A younger child might need simpler terms that they understand in context with their own world. When talking about world conflicts, using phrases like “falling out” or “disagreements” might be something they can make sense of, because those terms feel familiar, which in turn might make the situation seem less frightening.
- Older children might seek more information and have more questions for you. Trying to be clear and concise, and also checking out what they think, could be a helpful way to explore big topics together. If talking about the news with your child doesn't feel comfortable, asking family friends or relatives can be a good way to get some outside support.

“My children are a range of ages, so how and what we talk about very much depends on their age. For example, I might talk in more detail with my teenage daughter than I would with my eight-year-old.” - Serge

#3: Normalise their feelings.

When your children have big feelings about things they see on the news, it can be very tempting to tell them, “Don't worry” or “Don't be scared”. This often comes from a place of love and care. In actuality, however, when children very clearly express their feelings, minimising them by using “don't” and “stop” statements might prevent them from coming to you in the future. It might also lead to your children feeling overwhelmed by or ashamed of their emotions.

“My instinct as a parent is to make things better. But, at the same time, I really do try to welcome all their feelings, because they are important. Saying things like, ‘don't cry’ or ‘don't be silly’ doesn't make them feel better; it just shuts down how they really feel.” - Lara

#4. Use facts where it's necessary.

Talking clearly about the facts in an age-appropriate way can be useful so that children know what is true and what isn't. This can be especially useful for older children who have access to technology, where they could be exposed to fake news stories and have more unsupervised interaction with their peers.

You don't have to have all the answers, either; looking together at reputable news sources, such as BBC Newsround, is a great way to find the facts and encourage them to do the same, rather than believing everything they read, see, and hear.

“I haven't really wanted to have big, in-depth chats about worrying news with my kids. I don't want them to have to deal with scary things happening in the world. However, I've definitely changed my mind on this recently. My child came home from secondary school and told me about a video they'd seen about a recent news story. The video wasn't from a reputable news source, and it was actually full of misinformation. What they'd seen had really frightened them, so the real facts - explored simply with me, as their parent - helped them to feel less anxious and worried. It also gave them a chance to look at reputable news sources.” - Ray

#5: Think about what might help them.

When the news is upsetting or alarming, it can make people of all ages feel overwhelmed or out of control. Thinking together with your child about what might help them can give both them and you a positive or alternative focus, rather than solely focusing on the negative stories that they have been exposed to.

Here are some tips to help:

Think practically:

Thinking about what you can do to help can be a practical way to deal with a crisis, especially when we feel helpless. Charities like Oxfam and The British Red Cross have some great initiatives, such as collections and ways to raise money. Plus, checking out your local charities, groups, and organisations might be a good way to find something closer to home you can get involved in, too.

Look at the bigger picture:

Focusing on the negatives is something we all do from time to time, especially when the news is disturbing. But there is still a lot of good happening in the world, even during a crisis.

So, how can we help our children to see this?

Ray says, “Something we’ve started doing when the news is scary is looking for the everyday heroes in the background. Those little acts of kindness from strangers towards those in need really helps my kids see the good, even when bad things are happening. Noticing the helpers amongst the chaos on the news can help to soothe those difficult feelings and help everyone see the whole picture, rather than just the scary headlines.”

Manage your news exposure:

Being mindful of how much news your children are exposed to as much as you can is a way to help them feel less overwhelmed by things they see, hear, and read. Of course, this isn’t always easy with older children, but gently exploring this idea with them could be a good way to help them monitor their own news intake.

It might be helpful to limit news intake to certain times of the day. For example, you might want to avoid reading, watching, or discussing news stories before bed. You could also reduce instant access to news by turning off news alerts on mobile phones.

Do something together:

When things feel upsetting or overwhelming for your children, taking a moment to do something else they enjoy is a great way to soothe difficult emotions. Whether this is a cuddle and a film, making dinner together, playing a video game, or a walk with the dog, doing something your children enjoy with someone that helps them feel safe can be so useful in managing complicated feelings.

*Please remember: children don't always want to do things together, and that's okay. Doing something they enjoy by themselves might work better for some children. If you're unsure, asking your child what they need or would prefer can be helpful.

One final tip

When you are trying to support someone else, don't forget about yourself. Concerning world news affects people of all ages.

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