



## Children and disaster coverage in the media: An ages and stages approach

From time to time, disasters such as the recent Victorian bushfires, war in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and bombings in Mumbai and Bali, are given saturation coverage by the media. Child development specialists have warned that children can be traumatised by being exposed to reports and images of these frightening events.

This fact sheet describes some methods by which parents and caregivers can assist children who have been disturbed by exposure to programs in the media about such events. It gives both general information and specific tips for each age group, i.e. babies and toddlers, preschoolers, early primary school, upper primary school and high school. The fact sheet concludes with a reminder about managing your own response to such tragedies and provides a list of useful internet sites and references.

### General tips for helping children with fear

If you are with your child at the time that they are exposed to coverage that disturbs them, the more immediate your response the better. In the first instance this should include calmly removing them from the situation.

Following this, or if you become aware that your child is reacting to something they saw while you were not with them, the best overall strategy is to acknowledge their fear and reassure them:

- take your cues from the child. Don't assume they are more afraid than they may be. Conversely, don't assume that they are unaware of what has happened.
- take their fears seriously. Don't try to talk them out of it.
- respond calmly. Don't exaggerate their fears by using extreme language or by overreacting.

- answer their questions directly but don't give them more information than they are asking for or that they need
- provide physical reassurance with lots of hugs and touching
- make sure they know that it's okay to ask questions
- select media coverage according to their age.

### Babies and toddlers

Research shows that babies as young as 12 months old can be influenced by what they see on television. To protect them from harm:

- shield them from media reports as much as possible
- be aware that it is very hard for young children to make sense out of what they see and hear and this can make what they see even more frightening.
- be aware that sensational and disturbing images may be repeated many times and keep the TV and radio off while your children are awake. Repeated viewings will only make the situation worse.
- try not to show your own anxiety because children will quickly pick up your feelings and know there is something wrong. While they won't know exactly what is going on, very young babies and toddlers may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense."
- give lots of physical reassurance.



## Preschoolers

In addition to the above:

- limit TV coverage. Visual images can have a powerful impact.
- calmly explain that what has happened is a long way away and reassure them that they are still safe.
- keep to normal routines, which give young children a sense of safety and security.
- give lots of opportunities to play, draw and paint (without guiding them). This helps children to deal with feelings.
- try not to discuss what has happened in front of them
- listen to their feelings and encourage them to talk about them
- give lots of physical reassurance. Understand that the child will need more comfort, especially at bedtime.
- understand that behaviour problems may be part of their response and give extra reassurance and support.

## Early primary school

In addition to the above:

- keep the amount of television coverage seen by children of early primary school age to a minimum, particularly where there are graphic visual images
- instead of watching main news services, find out if your child watches the ABC program BTN (Behind the News) at school, or tape it yourself to watch with your child.
- if they ask questions about what they have seen, give them information without unnecessary detail.
- do other activities at the time when you usually watch the TV news, e.g. play games, walk the dog, go for a bike ride—things that give your family a sense of togetherness.
- give them lots of opportunities to talk about their feelings and their fears. Bedtime is often a good listening time.
- validate their feelings as real and acknowledge that something very scary has happened
- let them know they can talk to you any time they are afraid.
- if the coverage is of war and terrorism, remind them that teasing or ostracising children from other cultures is not acceptable behaviour
- a child of this age will be more aware of what is going on and the reactions of other people. They will feel a great deal of concern for their own safety and safety of family and friends.

Emphasise that they and their loved ones are safe.

- it is important to be honest with them. Tell them what you know about what happened without exaggerating or overreacting. Don't assume that they are too young to know what is going on.
- keep to routines that provide a sense of safety
- try to help them with their fears by talking through the issues according to their age and understanding eg "Sad and scary things do happen in the world but they are rare and there are lots of sensible people who are working to stop things like this happening and to look after those who have been hurt".
- most of all, stay calm yourself—this is what will make the world feel safe for your children.

## Upper primary school

Older children are at great risk because they know these events are real but have not yet learnt to distance themselves as much as adults or even adolescents can. A lot of the suggestions for helping lower primary school children will still be appropriate when they are in upper primary school. In addition:

- keep the amount of television coverage seen by children of upper primary school age to a minimum
- children this age will be more interested in details. Share what you know but don't overwhelm them. Explore their capacity to start applying rational thinking to what they have seen.
- use historical examples (e.g. World Wars, September 11, Bali bombing etc.) to explain that bad things happen to innocent people but we still go on with our lives and resolve bad situations.
- it is still important to acknowledge and talk through and acknowledge their feelings
- if the coverage is of war and terrorism, remind them that teasing or ostracising children from other cultures is not acceptable behaviour
- children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They may be prone to exaggeration. Jokes or humour can mask fears for this age group.
- provide comfort and reassurance.
- some children may act out scary feelings or may become more withdrawn. Talk with them and ask them to tell you about their feelings.

## High School

Young people are very aware of what is happening in the world and often feel very vulnerable. Provide assistance in the following ways:

- limit TV coverage to programs which provide a relatively objective coverage of events with a minimum of sensationalised and emotional content
- discuss any imbalance in what is portrayed and draw attention to other, happier, events that are happening in the world that do not receive media attention
- remember that young people may still show their feelings by their behaviour and may withdraw or become aggressive under stress. It is still important to react to feelings behind the behaviours rather than the behaviours themselves.
- respond to their feelings but also appeal to their rational abilities to comprehend.
- it is important to talk about what has happened, to listen to their feelings and share yours, but remember they are looking to you and your response for their own sense of safety.
- remember that reactions to a crisis such as this may continue or come back after the media response has died down
- young people in high school have probably already talked about the event with friends. It is important to be honest with them and let them know what is going on. This age may be glued to TV, eager for news and details.
- acknowledge fear, sadness, and anger.
- some teens may also just block out the whole thing and refuse to acknowledge that anything big has happened or that they care. This often masks real fears and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- some teens may make jokes. Guide them to develop appropriate humour around such events.
- some teens may be very interested in discussing broader issues that this tragedy raises. Be willing to engage them in serious discussions.
- be careful to avoid placing blame on a whole group of people or targeting particular groups.
- use historical tragedies as a basis for conversation. Talk to your teen about how the situation may be resolved in terms of rescue workers, governmental responses, foreign policy changes, etc.

## Managing your own response to tragedy

- you may wish to limit your own exposure
- it is important that adults also support each other. Talk about your feelings with friends.
- remember that there are many, many people working together to make the world a better place
- focus on the many heroic deeds happening during this crisis that attest to human strength and bravery
- keep up your usual routines and things you enjoy
- remember that you are the rock for your children no matter what their age. If you keep calm and caring they will usually be OK.
- if necessary seek help—if you are worried about your own or a child's immediate or ongoing reactions ask for help. You could call the ACCM (incorporating YMA) Helpline on 1800 700 357 or your local health professional.

## Useful links

[Connect for Kids: Help with the Healing, on the Web](http://www.connectforkids.org/node/392) (US) <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/392>

[Help your children make sense of natural disasters](http://www.parentingideas.com.au/uploads/Natural%20Disasters.pdf) (Aus) <http://www.parentingideas.com.au/uploads/Natural%20Disasters.pdf>

[Helping Children Understand Crisis and Trauma](http://www.angelfire.com/biz3/news/v1art1.html) (US) <http://www.angelfire.com/biz3/news/v1art1.html>

[How to Talk to Your Children About the News](http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/news.html) (US) <http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/news.html>

[Talking with Children about Violence](http://www.talkingwithkids.org/violence.html) (also in Spanish) (US) <http://www.talkingwithkids.org/violence.html>

[Talking with Kids About the News](http://www.talkingwithkids.org/television/twk-news.html) (also in Spanish) (US) <http://www.talkingwithkids.org/television/twk-news.html>

## Books and articles

Cairns, E. & Dunn, J. (1996) *Children & Political Violence: Understanding Children's Worlds*. NY: Blackwells.

Cantor, J. (1998) *Mommy, I'm scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*. US: Harcourt Brace.

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Deskin, G. & Steckler, G. (1996). *When Nothing Makes Sense: Disaster, Crisis, & Their Effects on Children*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.

Garbarino, J. (1996). *Let's Talk about Living in a World with Violence*. Chicago: Erikson Institute.

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Levin, D.E. (March/April, 1995). Understanding and Responding to the Violence in Children's Lives. Beginnings Workshop: Violence in the Lives of Children; *Child Care Information Exchange*. 102, 34-38.

Levin, D.E. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood: Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. (Wash, DC: Nat. Assoc. for the Ed. of Young Ch, 1998). [See Ch. 7: "When Pretend Meets Real, Responding to Violence in the News".]

Marsh, C. (1999) *Tough Stuff: How to Talk to Kids about Disturbing Contemporary Issues, including Sex in the White House, Guns at School, Drugs Everywhere, War, and More*. NY: Gallopade International.

Obiakor, F., Mehring, T. & Schwenn, J. (1997) *Disruption, Disaster, and Death: Helping Students Deal with Crises*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Saylor, C et al (2003) Media exposure to September 11. *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol 46, No12, Pp1622-1642.

Trozzi, Maria. (1999). *Talking with Children about Loss: Words, Strategies, and Wisdom to Help Children Cope with Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times*. Berkley Publishing Group, 1999.

## Related Fact Sheets

Browse as topics or download from the ACCM (incorporating YMA) website:

- Scary stuff: what scares children
- Watching the TV News
- Children and disaster coverage in the media—Questions and answers for parents



For more information about children and the media, call the **Children and Media Helpline** Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children **1800 700 357** National freecall, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or go to the ACCM website **[www.youngmedia.org.au](http://www.youngmedia.org.au)**

### Ordering more fact sheets

The Australian Council on Children and the Media (incorporating Young Media Australia) has over sixty printed fact sheets about the impact of the media on children. To get a list of available ACCM Fact Sheets, or to order your copies, call the

**Children and Media Helpline 1800 700 357**

You may also read ACCM Fact Sheets or download them from the **ACCM website [www.youngmedia.org.au](http://www.youngmedia.org.au)**