

## Talking to children about distressing events in the media (0–6 years)

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### How distressing events in the media affect children

Media such as television, radio, newspapers and the internet are a part of everyday life for most people. Also, some news media stories can be distressing – for example, news about wars, natural disasters and violent crime.

Infants and toddlers don't understand what's happening in news reports. However, they can still be affected by frightening images or video. Pre-schoolers are more likely to understand the words in a news report, although they won't understand things such as where an event is happening or who it affects. Also, if children see an event repeatedly on the news, they might not understand that it has only happened once.

If a news story is distressing for you, then your baby or young child is likely to pick up on your emotions and might feel frightened or upset too.

### Tips for talking to children about distressing events in the media

No parent wants to upset their children. So, it can be difficult to talk to young children about things such as terrorism or war.

You might try to limit your child's exposure to distressing news by switching news reports off when your child is around. However, you can't always control what your child sees or hears, so it's important to have a plan for when your child sees or hears about distressing events.

The way you handle it will depend on your child's age, and how much she can understand. Try these ideas:

- Pick the right time and place to talk to your child. A quiet spot over a snack might be a good start.
- Keep it brief and factual. For example, 'In the car today some news came on about a scary event. Some people got hurt which is very sad, but they are being looked after and the police have the person who hurt them so he can't do that again'.
- It's OK to tell your child if you are upset – for example, 'Some people lost their homes today in a fire and Mummy feels very sad'. However, if you're very distressed, it might help to talk to your spouse or a friend about it when your child is not around.

- Don't over-dramatize. Your child might copy your reaction or find it upsetting.
- Ask your child if she has any questions and how she is feeling.
- If your child seems upset, offer comfort and reassurance. This might mean a long cuddle or talking about how things will improve – for example, 'Governments around the world are meeting to make laws about pollution. There are lots of things we can do ourselves, such as recycling our plastic'.
- Move on to another, nicer activity together, such as drawing, or reading together to switch topics and provide time for feelings of safety and connection.
- Toddlers and pre-schoolers often express their feelings through behaviour such as tantrums, separation anxiety or withdrawal. If these sorts of things are becoming a problem for your child after being exposed to distressing news media, talk to your GP or paediatrician about seeing a psychologist, counsellor or other specialist support service.