

Kids and 'bad' news: How can parents safely introduce their children to news and current affairs?

April 8 2024, by Elise Waghorn



Credit: Miguel Á. Padriñán from Pexels

While much attention has been drawn to [the detrimental impact](#) of violent video games on children's developing brains, there has been relatively little discussion regarding the negative effects of news and current affair programs children are exposed to.

When people consume news and current affairs, it's hard to escape tragic events, from [natural disasters](#), acts of terrorism, and events that include loss of human life.

But do we stop to consider what distressing media is doing to our kids?

How children are impacted

Research undertaken by the [Audience Research Department of the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation](#) found [young children](#) who are exposed to news and current affair programs can be impacted so much that they start viewing the world as a scarier place. Research was undertaken through random telephone interviews with 537 Dutch children, with 48.2% of respondents stating they a fear reaction to watching adult news.

The study found children aged between 7-12 were most afraid of interpersonal violence and natural disasters such as fires, accidents and other disasters.

Researchers from the study even found children's symptoms are like [a trauma response](#)—including intruding thoughts (memories that pop into a child's head, nightmares, repeated discussion around events), avoidance (refusal to talk about news events, or to participate in [school activities](#)) and changes to arousal and reactivity (increased irritability and anger outbursts, difficulties in concentrating).

Even subtle exposure needs to be monitored

Even when children are playing in the background, if adults have the news on, children can be listening in.

Children under the age of seven might not understand the content, which can cause confusion, therefore raising worry and anxiety. This is because children under the age of seven do not have the brain function to [mentally manipulate information](#), and can't see things from another point of view.

Older teens, meanwhile, generally gain much of their [news content](#) from the internet and social media, meaning some parents are not aware of how much, or what, they are exposed to. However, due to their age, they are able to have a greater understanding of different perspectives.

Getting the balance right

According to psychological therapist [Annie Gurton](#), different age groups require different strategies when it comes to consuming news and current affairs:

1. children under the age of seven may perceive televised events as live occurrences, leading them to believe traumatic incidents are recurring when they see repeated broadcasts. They are likely to be greatly disturbed by images depicting suffering, crying, or violence
2. between 7-12, children tend to grasp that news reports convey events that have already taken place. They are increasingly capable of empathizing with victims, and may get anxious about the safety of themselves and their family when encountering distressing stories

3. teenagers aged 13 and older tend to exhibit heightened [emotional responses](#) to distressing events, often experiencing fear and deep concern for their and their family's safety. They may project such events into the future and worry about potential risks. However, they are also capable of reasoning and understanding statistical explanations, which can provide reassurance and alleviate their anxieties.

There is no magic timeframe for parents to introduce their children to news and current affairs, however it is important that we consider not just the age, but the maturity and understanding levels of the individual child.

However, we do know it's important for children to [take a break](#) from the coverage.

Setting a viewing limit of 30-60 minutes before encouraging children to get up and do something else is important.

Chat about it

A perfect opportunity to support children to know more about the world, without exposing them to the potential downside of the news, is to teach them about [why you need to censor their viewing](#).

This can help teach children to regulate their emotions, by expressing themselves when they see things that are upsetting. This might include empathizing with young children under the age of seven by saying something like: "I know you really want to watch the news, but some media can report events that are not safe for you to hear."

For an older child, it could be: "I am happy for you to watch the 'good news' stories but other events that are televised we need to watch

together."

The [Raising Children Network](#) has some fantastic tips for parents of school-age children when it comes to distressing news events:

1. turn off and take a break—this might mean allowing families 30 minutes to catch up on the main headlines, but then getting up and doing something else
2. age-appropriate information—children will cope better if they have age-appropriate information given to them. For example, during fire season, you might talk to your children about how due to the [extreme heat](#), the ground gets very dry, resulting in an increase of fires. This is why we have total fire ban days to reduce that risk.
3. talk to your children—explain, at an age-appropriate level, what they have watched and allow for open communication about what has happened. Allow them to ask questions and reflect
4. monitor your children's reactions to the news—ask them how they're feeling and share how you're feeling.

A great first step into the world of news and current affairs for children is programs like the ABC's "Behind The News," as parents and kids can watch together and discuss afterwards.

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