

Helping Kids Navigate Scary News Stories



By Eric Rasmussen, Ph.D.

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You know those moments when you notice that the house is a little too quiet, and you wonder what your little one is up to? When our daughter was a toddler, an unsettling silence was suddenly broken by a thump, bump, and a bang . . . and the screams of a child that had just tumbled down an entire flight of stairs.

She was bruised and shaken, but fine. Her parents? Also bruised and shaken. We hurried to the store and bought a baby gate – mostly to prevent it from happening again, but also partly to assuage the parenting guilt we felt for letting something bad happen to our sweet little girl.

No matter how vigilant we are as parents – no matter how many gadgets we buy to seal cupboards and cabinet – kids always seem to find the one thing that we missed in our babyproofing efforts.

I thought about this last September 11. I came home from work and suggested to my wife that it was time we talked about the events of that day with our 2nd grader. I figured it was time she learned about it. My wife looked at me like I was crazy and told me, “Eric, she already knows.” And sure enough, when I asked my daughter what she knew about it, she told me that in school they had watched a cartoon about airplanes crashing into buildings.

I felt violated – I wanted to be the one to have that first conversation. As parents, we want to introduce our kids to the world at the right pace; our instinct is to protect kids from scary topics until we feel they are ready to face them. But I learned an important lesson. When it comes to scary stuff in the news, we can’t put a lock or gate on everything. Young kids are going to see things in the media and hear about events in the news – even if we don’t feel ready to have that conversation.

It’s not just about turning off the TV news when your kindergartner is in the room. Kids watch us respond to events, they hear kids talking at recess, and they peek over our shoulder and see headlines, social media posts, or breaking news alerts flashing on our smartphone or tablet. And they have questions.

The trick for parents is knowing what to do next.

Now, I’m not a therapist, but based on my reading of the research – and my family’s experience – I can offer a few suggestions that have helped us:

1 Listen and clarify.

Encourage your kids to share what they already know, let them ask questions, and then offer *simple*, age-appropriate, clarifying information. For my slightly older kids, we try to help them distinguish between truth and rumor. With every news report of a scary thing, we can help them to patiently wait for all the information to come out, instead of latching onto the scary rumors that seem to fly around when such things happen.

2 Look for the helpers.

For younger kids, I've found it's helpful to help them see the positive in scary situations. The timeless advice from Fred Rogers still applies today. He said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" For example, if kids hear about a fire in the area, talk about the brave firefighters who quickly arrive on the scene. If they hear about a natural disaster, talk about all the ways people come together to help those in need – providing food, opening their homes, and raising money. And depending on the news, you and your family can look for ways to become helpers. As Harvard's Richard Weissbourd reminds us, kids and adults alike are "more distressed when we feel helpless and passive — and more comfortable when we are taking action."

3 Above all, reassure.

Kids need to know that the adults in their lives are there to help and protect them. Reassure them that they are safe and loved – and that they can always bring their questions and worries to you and that you will work through them together. Remember, there is not much that says 'everything is going to be alright' like a hug.

We cannot fully "news proof" our home when unsettling events happen in the world, but we can help kids navigate what they hear through simple, responsive, reassuring conversations.

More Resources:

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood: When Something Scary Happens

- Arthur: Helping Kids During Challenging Times



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