

Monitoring Children's News Exposure During and After a Disturbing, High-Profile Event

As a tragedy unfolds, whether it is a natural disaster, a mass act of violence, a terrorist attack or a high-profile crime event, many of us find ourselves glued to broadcast and Internet news. We find it hard to turn away from the real-time coverage, astonishing video and endless prognostications.

In times of tragedy, we seek information to help us make sense of the senseless. We also seek information for reassurance that we are not in danger ourselves, and for news of people we know who may have been impacted. Even though we actively seek it, many of us expose ourselves to traumatic news longer than is truly beneficial, and eventually reach the point of emotional and mental overload that finally compels us to turn it off. Understanding the impact it has on us, consider the impact that such news can have on children.

An average news broadcast regularly features quick stories of violence and personal tragedy. But when a high-profile traumatic event occurs, the news becomes a nonstop barrage of distressing imagery, alarming headlines and alerts, and worrisome language, all of which highlight disarray and uncertainty. And what's easily overwhelming for adults can be particularly frightening and confusing for children.

But how much attention do we think children actually give to the news? Don't they just ignore it in preference to something more interesting to them? And with today's technology, is it realistic to believe that we can actually shield children from traumatic news? As adults, it's easy to miscalculate the impact and overlook things we can do to limit children's exposure, especially when we may have a real need to get information ourselves.

A lot of research and debate has addressed the impact that prolonged exposure to traumatic news and imagery may have on children. While the debate continues as to the exact extent of the impact, we can reasonably acknowledge that traumatic news, of any length, is likely to create some concern and confusion, at a minimum.

There is no rule on how much and what type of news children should absorb. It really depends on the child and how the news is presented. However, there are things that adults should recognize about children and where they are with their emotional development that may contribute to their reaction to traumatic news.

Preschoolers are limited in their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Thus, while they may not demonstrate an immediate stress reaction to traumatic news, prolonged exposure may desensitize them to what they are seeing. Parents and guardians may wish to utilize the parental controls on their TV to limit access to news channels or may want to set a rule that children of this age cannot watch television news without their supervision.

The vulnerability increases with middle childhood. Children in this group can identify what's real, but they lack the perspective needed to properly process it. That is, they may fail to understand the likely frequency of such a tragedy, the proximity of the event in relation to them, or the context related to information being reported (e.g., the difference between someone being of a particular religious affiliation and someone practicing a radical version of that religion). Without proper understanding, children can jump to erroneous conclusions that increase their worry and anxiety and reduce their feelings of safety and security. Again, parents and guardians

1-800-899-8174
757-363-6777
www.OptimaEAP.com



may wish to set parameters regarding the viewing of news programs. They may also want to explore kid-friendly news sources. Likewise, it's helpful to watch or read the news with children at this age, so parents and guardians are aware of the information children are receiving and can monitor their reactions to it. Doing so creates an opportunity for dialogue, during which adults can properly frame the event within a larger context and reassure the child about his/her safety.

Adolescents certainly have easy access to news and a broader perspective, but one which is still developing. Parents and guardians should check in with their adolescents to explore their thoughts and feelings about the news. Doing so also provides a good opportunity to address tough issues with them, talk about right and wrong, reinforce the values and morals that the family holds, and provide guidance on an appropriate response or a perspective in which they may want to consider the tragedy.

When addressing children's exposure to traumatic news, it's not enough to simply try to control what they see, but also to talk with them about what they think and feel. Of all the things we can tune into during an unfolding traumatic news event, probably the best one is our children.

If you would like to speak with one of our counselors about a traumatic event that is affecting you or your child, call 1-800-899-8174 or 757-363-6777.