

IS THE NEWS TOO SCARY FOR KIDS?

BY PAUL L. UNDERWOOD
NEW YORK TIMES



How, and when, to introduce current events to your children.

The news can be as vulgar and upsetting as any Quentin Tarantino movie. How could I responsibly introduce her to the joys, but not the terrors? And when? To solve this conundrum, I spoke with a range of experts including child psychologists; the lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ policy statement “Media and Young Minds”; and the authorities at Common Sense Media, the go-to resource for parents ushering their children through this new age of media. What they told me confirmed my gut feeling — that my 5 years old daughter is still too young to deliberately consume the news. But she’s old enough that some of it will get to her no matter what, so I need to be prepared to have conversations with her so she can experience it appropriately. Here are some more tips:



Wait until your child is 7.

No matter how ready little ones might seem, Common Sense strongly recommends you wait until they are 7 before exposing them to even a light level of news. “It’s developmental,” said Jill Murphy, vice president and editor in chief at Common Sense Media. “It’s never a good idea to share traumatic information with children that age,” she said of the under-7 set. Kids that young have a hard time differentiating between what’s real and what’s fake, what’s near and what’s far, what’s possible and what’s highly improbable. “They might hear news that’s happening in Africa,” said Maria O. Alvarez, vice president at Common Sense Latino, “and feel it’s a threat to the family next door.” In a sense, the news is like any other medium — you should decide what your children can handle, emotionally and developmentally, and then experience it with them to provide guidance and context.

Comfort your child, and provide context.

The reality is, no matter how much you might try to shield your children from the news, they are still likely to encounter it. They might see a preview of local news on TV, hear the headlines on your favorite radio station, or even, if they’re older, read a news alert on your phone. They might overhear your conversations, or hear about something at school. When that happens, Alvarez says to tread lightly, and ask questions to determine what they know. Resist the urge to over-explain — you might confuse them, or make them feel more threatened. Keep in mind that kids age 7 and up are primarily, even solely, focused on how current events might affect them (and, by extension, you). “If and when you need to provide information to your children, it’s about being clear about safety and who they can rely on,” Murphy said. They don’t (yet) need to know that hurricanes can upend people’s lives, and that they might be more intense because of global warming. They do, however, want to know that, if there’s a hurricane, it’s not happening near your home. Also consider how to discuss news that might affect you directly — if you are in the path of a hurricane, for example, or if your family is undocumented, and your child hears about an Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid at school. Alvarez suggests assuring children that a plan is in place in case something happens, and that they will be protected. “Take a step back, before sharing too much,” she said. “At that age, it’s about reassuring your child that he or she will be fine. About that basic need to feel that you’re safe.”

Model good news consumption habits.

News is like food, as Alvarez pointed out, and you teach your child good eating habits in part by modeling those habits. If you’re checking the news on your phone while the kids are eating breakfast, narrate your experience to them. Not word for word, of course, but explain that you are reading the news, and that the news helps you understand what’s happening in the world. As noted by Dr. Jenny Radesky, M.D., assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan, and lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ policy statement, you can encourage children’s engagement by mentioning topics of importance to them, whether it’s a new discovery in space or just the new “Frozen 2” trailer. “I would recommend that parents find some slow time to read without distractions, sitting in a chair or sofa, and really put some concentration into it,” Dr. Radesky said. “We want kids to process important information this way — not multitasking, not just responding to what is the most exciting headline, not tweeting with anger about an article they half-read. We should show our kids that the news isn’t just entertaining and attention-grabbing, but it is a resource for making us better team players in our neighborhoods and our world, especially when we can really digest what is going on and think of solutions.” And remember that, in 2020, the news might not have an off switch, but you still need to unplug. “We need to remind ourselves as parents to be grounded in order to be the best parents that we can be,” Alvarez said. “If you’re constantly bombarded by news, going from one social media platform to another, you will be overwhelmed. It’s in our control to say: ‘I’ve had enough today. I need to enjoy my kids.’”

Remember: Children can feed off your energy:

This is a tricky one. Even our youngest kiddos can sense when something is upsetting us — whether it’s something that happened at work, or the latest headline. “Kids are watching,” said Dr. Eugene V. Beresin, M.D., executive director of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital. “From the time they’re infants, they’re looking at your facial expressions. As toddlers, looking at how you react, your tone of voice. My dog doesn’t get on the couch when I watch news or sports, because I scream at the TV. He knows. A 5-year-old wouldn’t, either.” If you get a troubling news alert during playtime, and it obviously affects your mood, explain the situation in the simplest terms, and again, reassure children that they are safe. “My kids would be like: ‘What happened? What happened?’” Murphy said. “I’d say: ‘Someone got hurt. It’s no one that we know.’” Explaining the source of your stress also reassures your children that the problem isn’t them.

When they’re ready: Investigate kid-friendly media outlets:

While your children might still be too young for, say, the daily paper or the evening news, they might be ready for deeper dives into newsy topics. Dr. Radesky recommends podcasts. “It could be about the slave trade, or the experience of immigrants,” she said. “It could be told from the perspective of the child, or you can dig into it from the perspective of a child.” The tone of podcasts is different from the news, too — calmer, less urgent, more inquisitive. Common Sense has a helpful list of kid-friendly news outlets, arranged by age level. (Alvarez especially recommends Newsela, a free, bilingual website and app that provide different news readings for different grade levels.) These include print publications, online outlets and mobile apps (as well as The Learning Network from The Times). News-adjacent publications like Sports Illustrated for Kids can get children into the habit of reading about current events. (Bonus: Kids love getting mail.) This also presents an opportunity for children to develop media literacy. Dr. Beresin encourages you to ask them how they know what they’re watching is true, or what questions they might ask a source interviewed during a documentary. And finally, encourage action. If an article upsets them, consider encouraging them to respond — by volunteering in the community, or simply by writing a journal of their thoughts. (This is for kids closer to 7.) You might also choose to focus on stories about children in the news. If they see an article about a teenager crossing the ocean to protest climate change, they might better understand how they, too, can participate in their local and global community. After all, that’s the ideal point of news: To inform us so that we can be better, more engaged citizens.

