



Talking with Children about Upsetting News Events

All children are exposed to news via newspapers, radio, the internet, and especially television. And they naturally turn to their parents with questions about what they have seen and heard. For a child whose parent is deployed, news about the wars can raise concerns about their parent's safety. This poses a special challenge for the parent who is at home to listen, understand, and answer their children's questions in a manner that is both honest and reassuring. Meeting this challenge successfully strengthens your child's inner strength, sense of security, and trust in you.

First, you know your child best. You have likely been through good times and stressful times before. How your child has reacted in the past is often a good predictor for how he or she will cope with new challenges. Think about what has been helpful for your child previously, and use these successful strategies from the past. Most children will benefit from maintaining regular routines, including daily schedules and normal expectations for schoolwork. Children will take their emotional cues from the adults in their world. If we are calm usually they will feel secure; however, it is important to talk to your child about his or her specific concerns.

Second, check in with your child. Find out what he or she has been hearing, seeing and thinking about a new event or whether it has not yet come to his or her attention. Questions such as, "Are kids at school talking about _____?" or, "What have you heard about _____?" are good ways to open such a conversation. If your child is younger and is not aware of the news, you may elect to go no further with this conversation. If your child has heard about the news event, encourage him or her to tell you about what they've heard or what they think about what others are saying. Ask if they have any specific worries. To answer questions and allay fears, it is important to really understand what your child is struggling with before you move to answer or reassure him.

Third, TV images can be upsetting. Turn off the TV around young children or those who may have been upset by TV news in the past. Be mindful that coverage of the same violent event over and over again can be misinterpreted as something that is happening repeatedly. Watch television with older children so you can answer questions and be aware of their feelings. Some older children need to be reminded that the TV images can be overwhelming and that it's OK not to watch. This is true for many adults, who may feel better listening to radio reports or reading newspaper coverage rather than watching disturbing TV images.

Fourth, make the most of family time. Spend extra time with your children. Turn off the telephone and the TV during meals so you can talk together. Often parents can identify time in the day or activities that facilitate thoughtful conversations. Sometimes, it is while driving in the car or when a child sits with a parent who is working in the kitchen. Those are great times to check in with your child and talk.

Finally, when a child feels the world in general is a little less safe, it is important to underscore the active things we do to increase our personal safety. These may include wearing seat belts or bike helmets, eating healthy foods and exercising, looking both ways before crossing the street and identifying who the supervising adults are in different settings so a child knows who to go to for help. When a child is feeling worried specifically about the safety of the parent overseas, support the child's connection to the parent overseas by using whatever avenues of communication are available. Remaining confident yourself, and reminding your child of the security that comes from the deployed parent's preparation, training, skills and those of the military leadership can go a long way to re-establish a child's sense of safety.

The following tips may be helpful at any challenging time:

Infants:

- Infants pick up on the anxieties and actions of those around them, so remain calm when interacting with your infant. Keep routines and their environment consistent.
- Infants may be fussy in reaction to anxieties around them.

Toddlers:

- Keep routines consistent.
- TV and radio news exposure should be limited and only in the presence of an adult.
- Offer videos to watch, read books and play with your child.
- If a toddler asks questions about what is going on, answer in simple terms. Make sure your child knows that you are there to keep him or her safe.

Preschoolers:

- TV and radio news exposure should be limited and only in the presence of an adult.
- If your preschooler asks questions about what is going on, answer in simple terms. Make sure your child knows that you are there to keep him or her safe.
- Spend extra time hugging and cuddling your child.
- Play with your child. Connect with friends, or organize a playgroup.
- Do some type of special activity together. Watch a movie, play a game, bake cookies.

School Age Children:

- TV and radio news exposure should be in the presence of an adult.
- Give children plenty of opportunities to talk about what they think is going on, and clear up misconceptions.
- Encourage children to share their feelings and concerns with you. Let them know it's all right to be afraid and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- Be available, as this age group may be more interested than younger children in the events but less capable than older children at coping and communicating.
- Reassure kids that many people are keeping them safe and that your family is safe.
- Offer special activities or games to them.

Adolescents:

- Listen, listen, listen.
- Watch TV news with them.
- Engage your adolescent in healthy conversation. "What do you think about the events that are taking place in our world today?" "How did you feel when you first heard about this?"
- Share your feelings with them honestly.
- Encourage them to express feelings of anger, and brainstorm with them about how they can deal with those feelings.

All Children:

- Be with your children as much as possible
- Ask – don't assume you know – about their understanding of events reported in the news.
- Validate feelings that your children shares with you as real, ensure they understand that there are no wrong feelings, and tell them that you have similar feelings.
- When they ask about their safety, explain that you as a parent will do everything you can to keep them safe. Address their specific concerns.
- If children have questions about the safety of their school, explain that parents, teachers and school officials are doing everything possible to keep them safe. Address their specific concerns.
- Children may exhibit some of the following behaviors during stressful times:
 - Regression – acting younger and seeking attention
 - Becoming more clingy
 - Having difficulty sleeping
 - Being more temperamental, or making angry comments
 - Talking about acts of violence
 - Playing or acting more aggressively

All of these reactions are normal. It is important to keep talking to your children and allow them to express all of their feelings