



## Children and disaster coverage in the media: Questions and answers for parents

From time to time, disasters such as floods, earthquakes and bushfires, wars and terrorist attacks are given saturation coverage by the media. Child development specialists have warned that children can be traumatised by being exposed to reports and images of these frightening events.

Here are some questions and answers to help you provide appropriate guidance and protection for your children.

### **Q: How old are the children in my care?**

**A: Respond according to their level of development.**

Depending on their age, children vary in their perception of the world. Very young children will pick up that something bad is happening, but will not be able to understand. Older children are at great risk because they know this event is real but have not yet learnt to distance themselves as much as adults or even adolescents can. With these children talk to them as much as they seem to need, ask them questions and listen, explore their capacity to apply rational thinking to what they have seen in the media. Contact the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM)'s Helpline (1800 700 357) to find out more about the response suitable for the developmental stage of your child.

### **Q: What media are they seeing or hearing?**

**A: Minimise and rationalise.**

Take control of the media that your children see or hear in your own home. Limit exposure according to their age and ability to cope. Keep the amount of television coverage seen by children of primary school age to an absolute minimum, particularly where there are graphic visual images. The ABC program *BTN (Behind the News)* covers current events in a more age appropriate manner. Find out if your child watches *BTN* at school, or tape it yourself to watch with your child.

For adolescents, try to find programs which provide a relatively objective coverage of events with a minimum of sensationalised and emotional content. If you want to keep informed yourself, watch programs after your children are in bed or, if you have more than one TV, watch it in another room and explain why. If your child spends time in the care of others, explain that you want minimal media exposure and ask them to assist.

### **Q: How are my children feeling?**

**A: Listen and acknowledge.**

Children may be feeling fear, horror, sadness and anger. Encourage your children to talk about their feelings. Ask questions, listen to what they have to say and acknowledge the feelings they are able to articulate. Bedtime is often a good listening time. Give young children lots of opportunities to play, draw and paint as this will help them to deal with feelings. Understand that some children will not express their feelings with words, but may act out, become withdrawn, aggressive or use humour inappropriately as their way of coping. It is important to react to the feelings behind the behaviours rather than the behaviours themselves and give extra reassurance and support.

### **Q: How am I communicating with them?**

**A: Openly and honestly.**

It is important to communicate openly and honestly with your children about what is happening. Acknowledge your own feelings and tell them what you know about what is happening without exaggerating or overreacting. Answer their questions directly but don't give them more information than they are asking for or that you consider they need.

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**Q: How can I reassure them?**

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**A: Give both physical and logical reassurance.**

Most young children and many older children will be reassured by physical contact. Give them lots of hugs and kisses and expect that they will need more comfort, especially at bedtime. Older children will respond to calm explanations, such as that the events are happening a long way away, that the world has recovered before from disasters and that there are many people working together to make the world safe again and to help those who have been directly affected.

**Q: How can I make them feel safe?**

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**A: Routines, family togetherness and monitoring your own response.**

Keep to normal routines, which provide a sense of safety and security. Instead of watching the TV news, do activities that give your family a sense of togetherness such as playing games or walking the dog. If you are feeling anxious, try not to show it. Remember that you are the rock for your children no matter what their age; calm, caring and consistent reactions from you will make the world feel safe for your children. Limit your own TV intake. If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk to other adults when your children aren't there.