

# Talking to Kids About Scary News

**Here's how to relay what's happening in the world without giving children more than they can handle.**

By [Dr. Gail Saltz](#), Contributor, US News and World Report | April 10, 2017

These days, it seems like there's almost always something scary in the news – whether it's happening at home or abroad. We hear about terrorist attacks, natural disasters and all sorts of heinous crimes.

It can be overwhelming for parents who don't want to frighten their children but wish to ensure they have a realistic view of the world.

There's no way to protect your child from the scary and painful things that happen locally and around the globe. In fact, I'd contend that you do kids a disservice when you shelter them too much. That's because it's important for kids to learn how to manage painful feelings.

Still, there are certain basic parameters to consider when relaying bad news. Here are my suggestions:

**Limit how much you share.** Talk about big news your kids are bound to hear about anyway, but don't update them on every terrible detail. What's more, don't keep the news on in the background of your home when your children are present. They hear it, they interpret it, and even though you know the news broadcast is replaying the same story, a child can view it as though the event is happening over and over again.

**Be their source.** When there's significant news your children are likely to hear about somewhere, it's better for you to be that source. Rather than sugarcoating the details, pay attention to your emotional response to the news, which will set the tone of your child's emotional reaction.

Deliver the news to your children in a calm manner. Then ask if they have questions, and be prepared to respond to those. If you don't know the answer, tell them you'll try to find out; or if the answer can't really be known, it's fine to say that, too. You may express surprise, sadness and concern, but try to do it in an even manner. When you speak in a very upset or even hysterical way, children perceive the panic, and that's primarily what they register.

The other reason to be your children's source for news is so that your kids can properly process the information, and doesn't hear about it first from someone who relays it in an inaccurate or overly emotional way.

**Share information they can grasp.** The level of detail you provide should be based on what your kids can comprehend. Use words, concepts and comparisons they're likely to understand to explain the news in a way that's accessible to them. What is over their heads can be left out, because confusion tends to increase uncertainty and anxiety.

**Let them guide the follow up.** It will take your children time to process upsetting news. So once you've explained what happened, let their questions determine what other information you provide. Resist the urge to overshare, or provide more details than they need to formulate an age-appropriate understanding of the news.

**Focus on your children.** Most kids, when hearing a news story, become frightened because they first imagine that this could happen to them or their family. Reassure them that your family is safe and secure. For young children, you might reiterate that what's been covered in the news didn't happen to your family; for kids of all ages, you could also discuss how you'd respond if affected – like, for example, in the event of severe weather. Let them know that, in most cases, large-scale tragedies covered in the news are uncommon. Explaining that has a calming effect.

**Allow a child to grieve.** If something upsetting or sad has happened, it's OK to be sad. Children sometimes need ways to express that. Drawing pictures or playing games that reenact a scenario can help children work through their feelings. Allowing kids to repeatedly discuss feelings or even “memorialize” someone or something can help them to process and accept difficult losses.

**Know when your child needs help.** It's normal to experience increased anxiety or sadness following a distressing event. But be aware of issues that persist for weeks or more, like if a child is regressing in regards to milestones he or she has hit – such as potty-training, sleeping alone at night or getting homework done. Such regression could indicate they may have ongoing anxiety that needs attention. Other signs of ongoing high anxiety can include slipping grades, socially isolating oneself, being quick to tear up or cry, changes in appetite and sleep or frequently expressing worries and fears. In addition, kids with high anxiety may try to avoid anything that reminds them of the event, such as being outside when it is raining after hearing about a terrible hurricane or refusing to fly in a plane following news of a plane crash. Early intervention and treatment by a mental health professional can make a big difference in putting your child back on their previous developmental path.