



How to help your child when world events seem frightening

When the world seems an uncertain place or world events seem frightening, our children look to us for reassurance and advice. Sometimes knowing just what to share with them or how to answer their questions can be confusing for parents and carers and will depend very much on the age of your child or young person.

If you work or volunteer with children and young people, you're likely to have conversations about difficult or upsetting topics.

You won't always have a chance to plan ahead for these conversations as they can happen unexpectedly. A child or young person may raise a sensitive issue with you, or an event could trigger the need to talk to the children you work with. This might be something on a global or national scale, such as coronavirus or a terrorist attack, or something more personal such as bereavement or serious illness.

Suppose you do have time to prepare for a conversation. In that case, this can help you feel confident about raising and addressing challenging topics. For example, you might be planning a session on a topic such as climate change, sex and relationships or discrimination.

Whether or not you've been able to plan the conversation in advance, reflecting back on what was said afterwards can help you learn and improve for next time. Whatever has happened to upset a child or young person, it's really important they have someone they can have an open discussion with:

Preparing for a conversation

If you're planning to talk to children about a sensitive topic, it's helpful to work out how you will broach the subject in advance.

Think about the aim of the session. For example, you might want to raise awareness of a complex topic such as discrimination and give young people the opportunity to say how they feel about it.

Or you may want to help young people understand official guidance, such as staying safe in a terrorist attack or minimising the risk of transmitting a serious infection. Plan activities to help children understand the topic and give them opportunities to ask questions and discuss their feelings.

Group or individually

Decide the most appropriate group size for your discussion. This depends on the topic, the needs and maturity of the children involved and the practicalities of where and how you work with the children.

Is this something that's best addressed in a large group like an assembly?

Are there benefits to having a discussion in an established group like a team or a class?

Would children feel more comfortable in smaller groups, or maybe even having a one-to-one chat with a trusted adult?

If you are working one-to-one with a child, there are extra measures you need to take.

Having a conversation

Whether you're talking to a group or an individual, there are some general principles that will help you discuss sensitive subjects with children and young people.

Help them feel comfortable

Acknowledge that the topic isn't easy to talk about but explain why it's important to talk about it.

Show you're listening

Encourage children to talk openly and make it clear that you value their opinions. You could set ground rules, such as not interrupting and respecting other people's points of view.

Give them time

Allow children to set their own pace - don't push them to say more than they want to. They may need time to process certain topics – so make sure they know they can come back to you another time if they need to.

Stay neutral

Avoid displaying strong emotions such as shock or embarrassment in response to something a child or young person says. This might discourage them from sharing their experiences with you.

Be open and honest

Encourage children and young people to ask questions. Answer them as honestly as possible, whilst taking into consideration their age and emotional maturity.

Get your facts straight

If you don't know the answer to a question, say so – don't provide young people with information that's incorrect. You could look for the answer together, recommend where they can find information or research and share what you have found next time you meet.

If you're talking about something like coronavirus where the situation may change quickly, explain this and let children know how to stay updated as things progress.

Use the right language

Make sure children understand the terminology associated with the topic and that it is age-appropriate. Avoid using euphemisms. Look at the language used on resources developed by and for children such as the [Childline website](#).

Be clear about confidentiality

It's important that children feel able to share their experiences with you. But if you have any concerns about their wellbeing you must make a report following your child protection procedures. Never promise to keep things a secret and explain that you have a responsibility to tell people who can help.

[> Find out more about information sharing](#)

Put support in place

Following your conversation, children may have further questions or want to talk more about the issue. Make sure they know who they can talk to.

Think about how to let parents know what you've been talking about, so that they can provide further support at home. Children and young people can also [contact Childline](#) if they need support afterwards.

Consider setting some time aside as a follow-up session to give children the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings.

Recognise the signs

Talking about difficult or upsetting topics might make some children think about other things that are happening in their lives.

Make sure you are equipped to recognise the signs that a child you are talking to may have experienced abuse, and know how to respond.

Talking about the big topics

Listening and offering your child a safe space to make sense of their experience is the most important aspect

- Reassure your child of their safety with you
- Normalise all feelings - your child's and your own always stay honest
- Keep it simple and age appropriate
- Be led by their questions and give them opportunities to ask, you don't need to have all the answers

Teenagers will have information at their fingertips. They may well be seeing and reading a lot of information online, on social media, from the news, and hearing information at school. It is therefore important that you keep communication open between you and your child, perhaps scheduling in some one-to-one time so you can have an uninterrupted conversation about what is happening, offering your support, helping them manage what might be going through their minds.

It is good to start with what they know and explore with them what their feelings and thoughts are about it all. This will allow you an understanding of their perspective on things. You can then talk through the facts with them, thinking things through together, and at the same time, helping them become aware that some of what they are reading may be fake news or misreported.

You don't need to have all the answers, but being there for your child, trying to help them make sense of things will help them feel less isolated with their thoughts.

Let them express any feelings they need to and let them know that these feelings are okay and make sense. In doing this, you can show them that you understand them and that their feelings are important and valid. Give them plenty of reassurance that you are there for them and that you will get through this together.

How to help your child when world events are frightening

When the world seems an uncertain place or world events are frightening, our children look to us for reassurance and advice. Sometimes knowing just what to share with them or how to answer their questions can be confusing for parents and carers and will depend very much on the age of your child or young person.

Be aware of conversations at home when your children are within earshot and be mindful of what they may overhear. They will pick up your fears and anxieties easily.

When your child asks what is happening, it is always useful to find out what they know first. For example, it might be useful to think about the following:

- what they have heard and what they know already
- what they understand
- how they feel
- what are their fears and worries
- how you will support them and keep them safe

Be led by your child's questions and do offer opportunities in the day for them to ask questions.

Always remain open and honest with your child, whilst keeping the information given at a level that is age appropriate. Perhaps begin with simple information as too much detail may overwhelm your child.

Older children will have information at their fingertips, so they may benefit from one-to-one time with you, to explain things and talk through what they have seen and heard on social media, the news, from friends or teachers. In contrast, much younger children will need to hear things from a more basic viewpoint. Don't forget that you can allow the conversation to be led by your child's questions and try to keep your answers age appropriate.

If you don't know the answer to your child's questions, be honest and let them know this. At the same time, you can pick up the feeling underneath the question and reflect this back to them, for example, ***"I am not sure of the answer to that, but I wonder whether, underneath the question, you might be feeling worried right now"***. You could follow this by reassuring them that they are safe, for example, ***"I do know that we are safe now and I wonder what we could do to help you feel safe when that question pops back into your head?"***

Normalise and validate all feelings, including your child's and your own. It is important that children feel supported in the conversation and their feelings and thoughts are not dismissed.

Let your children know they are safe.

All children, even teenagers want to know that their parents can keep them safe. The best way to communicate safety is by discussing worrying news openly, confidently, clearly and

truthful facts. Go through all of the reasons that mean they are in a safe place rather than well-meaningly dismissing their feelings by telling them everything is fine.

Let them know that it is normal to be concerned.

Try sharing with them that you also find events like this worrying. Let them know that you can balance up these worries with the reality of them actually coming true. You would want them to leave this conversation realising that although bad things can happen, they don't happen very often, so they do not need to be scared all the time.

Tailor the conversation to their age.

All children have different temperaments and sensitivities. Their ability to understand the world, take in and react to bad news will depend on their age. If you have more than one child, you might want to talk about the news with them individually and tailor what you say to their needs and level.

Find the right time to talk about it.

It may be that your child starts asking questions about a news event at an inconvenient time. In this case, let them know that you have heard them and think what they are asking about is important. Tell them you would like to talk to them about it later and invite them to remind you, so they know you are interested.

Leave lots of space for questions.

It is common for children to have misunderstandings about traumatic events. Children tend to make up what they don't know, which is often a lot worse than the reality. Encouraging them to ask lots of questions is important as it allows space for a truthful and open explanation to help correct these.

Allow for repetition.

Remember that children tend to repeat themselves when they are feeling uncertain or worried. They may need to ask the same question several times until they feel more reassured.

Be as truthful as possible.

When children ask a direct or tricky question, it can be tempting to avoid it by bending the truth. This can be unhelpful when they are talking to others about what happened. It is often more helpful to be as honest as possible. This is also true of questions when you don't know the answer. Remember that it is okay not to know or to go away and find out and get back to them

Lean in and open up the conversation

When children ask a question, it means they have already considered an answer. Having the conversation is less about giving answers to your child and more about -How you will support them and keep them safe-What they understand-How they feel -What they have heard/know

Take media breaks from social media and the news

Both can amplify anxiety and be triggering if you're someone who already struggles with anxiety

You could think with your child about how the media often focus on negativity, whereas there are many positive, beautiful things that are happening in the world on a daily basis that will never be reported.

It would be beneficial to think about what sites your teen follows on social media, and to encourage them to try to minimise the sites that are showing more upsetting images and perhaps replace with sites that portray more positive news stories.

Let your teen know that consuming large amounts of negative news isn't helpful for them, and you could therefore, perhaps think with them about minimising how often they are reading the news. You could suggest that instead, they check in with the news at certain times of the day for specific periods of time, and then try to focus on other, more nurturing things.

If your teen has their phone on alert for news messages coming in, this will increase their worry and anxiety. Perhaps encourage them to have these alerts turned off. Also, be mindful of whether your child has their phone with them at night as if they are checking news before they go to bed or even throughout the night, this will increase feelings of worry and anxiety. Perhaps instead, encourage them to listen to a mindfulness app before bedtime or maybe listen to some calming music.

News is everywhere. In the digital age, it is no longer possible to control the news that we are exposed to or shield children from upsetting information. What you can do is help to minimise the negative impact it has on your children.

You can do this through open and honest conversations at home, such as the tips below:

1. A news blackout is rarely helpful. The important thing here is balance. Force-feeding children news or going to great lengths to shield them from it can be unhelpful. Avoid turning the television off or closing web pages when they come into the room. This can peak their interest to find out what's really going on – and that is when their imagination can take over.

2. Let them know the facts. If children have access to clear and honest explanations of what is happening and know that is okay to talk about scary or tricky subjects, it can give them the confidence to reach out about them. Try reading or watching reputable news sources together that you have already previewed, or share news in the moment by explaining what is happening verbally in an unbiased way.

3. Discourage overexposure. Small doses of real-life news are really helpful. Large doses can have a negative impact as children can become fixated on a news story, and repeatedly look at news coverage relating to it. To avoid overexposure, encourage them to discuss the news story with you once they have read about it. This provides a safe space for all of their questions.

Remember news outlets have to fill 24 hours a day and are constantly trying to compete with each other. Only look at facts not speculation. Do not hit the share button immediately. It is very important to check if the news you want to share comes from verifiable sources.

Proceed with caution and be thoughtful about what you share. News outlets fill the time between facts with interviews which often leads to worst case speculation

Connect with friends and family

Talk about your anxiety, you won't be the only one feeling anxious. Don't bottle up your anxiety. Being anxious is a normal human reaction. Check in with your thoughts. Remember your feelings are normal. It can be easy to slip into catastrophic thinking/ worst case scenario. Give support details. If you feel too overwhelmed, reach out to a professional or a MH helpline

Provide a range of activities

Not everyone feels comfortable talking openly during a group discussion so it might be helpful to consider the different ways children and young people can explore a topic. This might include:

- arts and crafts
- drama and improvisation
- debating
- taking positive action, for example raising awareness about a particular issue or supporting people who are affected by it.

Conversation starters

Reading is a great way to start a discussion. If a topic has been in the news recently, you might find it helpful to provide children with a selection of articles about it. Or you could share a book about a particular subject and ask them about what they think. Make sure you are using reliable sources of information.

Talk to others - make sure you do whatever you need to feel safe and contained.

Move - Notice how much news and information you are consuming

Rest - Look after yourself in this.

What happens in the world is affecting all of us. Make sure you are doing what you need to help you feel safe. This might be connecting with others or going out in nature. It is also worth being mindful of the amount of news that you are listening to yourself, as this may be increasing your levels of stress and worry.

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Children 8-12

How does it make them feel? Check what they know. May have an idea what war is. Likely to have heard related words. Check where they have heard about it.

Help in a big or small way is what turns anxiety into a healthier and more positive reaction. Share stories you won't be able to help with every news story, and that's okay. Work out what's manageable for you. If you can find practical ways to help, this makes a positive

difference in the world and eases own anxiety. Evidence shows that helping others can also benefit our mental health.

- Show your support to the people and non-profit companies that provide aid and support - sometimes helping locally with an elderly neighbour or someone self-isolating is achievable
- Show support for causes, use social media to call for donations
- Taking positive steps brings hope to children - if your child is old enough and you feel it is appropriate, it offers them a good model of how to problem solve in difficult situations
- Invite them to join in or share with them what steps you have taken. They could write to their MP and/or choose which charity to contribute donations to.

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Take action. This can be a way to help the child feel part of the solution and can offer an age-appropriate focus for them, for example getting involved in fundraising, collecting some things to donate, writing letters to key people, or making pictures or posters about world peace.

- Share reliable, accurate information in line with their worries/concerns.
- May benefit from protected time with you to talk about the news.
- Will have an understanding what the terms mean.
- Have information at their fingertips.
- Be curious about what they have heard and where - i.e. social media/YouTube/friends/teachers.
- Keep open lines of communication