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National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Disasters, the media and your child



When disasters or traumatic events occur in Australia or elsewhere in the world, they're often given constant media coverage. It can seem like every time you turn on the TV, radio or go online there is more news about the event, who has been hurt and what is happening in the immediate aftermath.

Media coverage during times of disaster or traumatic events is important: it can provide those who are affected with news and information about where to go, how to get help and when it's safe to return to their homes. However, many people, including children and families, can become absorbed by the constant news stream about the event and sometimes they can watch or listen for hours.

Impact of too much media exposure

Adults need to be mindful of how much exposure their children have to coverage of disasters or traumatic events on TV, radio or the internet. The media often focus on the most frightening aspects of an event and this coverage can contain graphic, scary and disturbing images. Seeing this type of media coverage can cause distress or worry for children. Children will also often discuss what they have seen in the media with each other. As a result, even though your children may not watch coverage constantly at home, they are still exposed to it through their friends and chatter on social media.

Media coverage can have an impact on children in the following ways:

- They can feel that they are unsafe and that something bad may happen to them or their family.
- They can be led to think this event is happening constantly, rather than one event being replayed.
- They can spend a great deal of time thinking about the event, which can affect their sleep and time at school.
- They may be anxious that the same sort of event may happen to them or their family.

The more media coverage children see, the more likely they are to become afraid or upset.

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How to help your child

It's important that parents, carers and other family members help children to cope with the media coverage that they may see of a disaster or traumatic event.

Some recommended ways to manage this include:

- Try to be there with your children when they are watching coverage of the event. This way you can talk to them about their fears and answer any questions they may have.
- Speak to children about the event in language they will understand, and set limits on the amount of time that they are able to watch TV or internet coverage of the event.
- Explain to your children why you are doing this, that you don't want them to worry unnecessarily, and that adults are managing things.
- Provide alternative activities for your children to take them away from the media coverage, such as watching a different TV show or playing a game.
- Give your children information to help them to understand what's happened, why it's happened, how likely this is to happen to you and your family.
- Remind your children that while what's happening in the traumatic event is upsetting, there are also lots of good things happening in the world, though these don't always receive the same level of attention.
- Reassure your children that they're safe and that you're there to answer their questions.
- Provide support and comfort to them if they're upset or feeling unsafe.

Talking to your children and continuing to follow the normal routines and rhythms of your daily life are important ways to help them feel safe and secure. Keep in mind that if your children begin to show signs of excessive worry or distress at the media coverage they have seen, you may need to speak to your GP or another health professional.

This resource was written by Professor Beverley Raphael and Amanda Harris, with updates in June 2018 by Nicola Palfrey. Professor Beverley Raphael is a psychiatrist former Chairperson of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN). Amanda Harris is a psychologist and former Director of the ACATLGN. Nicola Palfrey is a clinical psychologist and Director of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network.



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