

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Preschoolers & the News

REMEMBER:

- *Young children sometimes understand the world very differently to adults and older children.*
- *Preschoolers may be unable to distinguish between what they see on TV and what is in their immediate environment or life.*
- *Distress can be due to misunderstanding or confusion.*
- *Listen carefully. Your response should be based on what your child knows or thinks.*
- *Don't over-explain.*
- *Look for learning opportunities.*
- *Provide lots of reassurance, calming activities and familiar routines.*

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Young children can see and understand the world quite differently to adults and older children. Parents need to be able to help preschoolers understand world events and news stories in age-appropriate ways.

What Preschoolers Understand About the News

Preschoolers often mix up fact with fantasy. If they see a war on TV and you tell them it's very far away, they generally don't understand what "far away" means. It could be as far as the mailbox on the corner, the post office a few blocks away, or Grandma's house in the next town! And when they see disturbing events on TV, they may even think they're happening right there in the house.

Young children take words very literally. After the Columbine shooting in America, one child thought that his mother's garden - which was filled with columbine flowers - was dangerous. Another child, upon hearing news of a heart attack was afraid something would attack his heart.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It is generally unnecessary to discuss violent events on the news, unless you know your preschooler has already been exposed to them. If you are aware of this or observe changes in her behaviour, you probably should discuss the news event in age-appropriate ways.

It can be useful to discuss news that is connected to your preschooler's life. The news is a way of learning about the world. Early discussion about your young child's experiences in the world sets the stage for more in-depth discussions as your child gets older.

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Signs of Stress

While preschoolers may not comprehend exactly what happens on the news, if it is disturbing news they can still be acutely aware that something is wrong and feel their parents' anxiety.

If they are exposed to violence on the news, some preschoolers may become anxious, have nightmares, change their eating habits or fear being away from their parents. Others may show no signs of stress at all but still be affected.

Changes in behaviour to look for might include increased interest in war-related play (e.g. pretending blocks are missiles) or behaviour that is out of character with your child, such as increased difficulty with separation or trouble going to sleep.

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These discussions can come out of day-to-day activities you do together. Talk about the weather outside and then watch the weather report or listen to it. You might talk about an election when you take your child to the polls, and talk about recycling as you put the cans out together.

If your child has a question, ask what she knows in an open-ended way. You might ask, "What do you know about that?" and then answer your child's question in an age-appropriate way.

Finding out what your child understands about what she has seen or heard will help guide your response. As well as dealing with fears, you may want to clear up any confusion or misconceptions. It is important not to give too much explanation or you may add to your child's confusion.

Explain to your child that they are safe. When children hear or see a scary event on the news, they often relate it to themselves and may feel directly threatened. Reassuring your child that he is safe and that the event is not happening here should help him feel secure.

Reviewing and maintaining routines can be comforting as well. For example, you might explain what time you will be home, who will pick your child up from school and what your plans are for the weekend.

Provide art materials, blocks, dolls, and stuffed animals. Playing with these objects will help your child explore what she feels. In a response to a specific news story, offer related props for the play. (An example would be to provide toy cars if your child talks about the police cars on the news or in the neighbourhood).

Listen carefully. Find out what your child has to say about the news. There is no "right way" of thinking about a topic and your young child will interpret it differently than you. So listen to what he says and base what you say on his interpretation, not your own.

Snuggle and cuddle. As you would with an even younger child, offer lots of cuddling and hugs, and be patient and sensitive to changes in patterns of eating, sleeping and toileting.

More Ideas

Preschoolers can view TV as a magic window into the world and have trouble separating television images from their daily lives. Babies and young children tend to focus on highly stimulating sights and sounds, including loud voices and noises.

- Shield preschoolers from news coverage of violent or distressing events whenever possible.
- Consider turning off your TV and radio when young children are in the room.
- If young children do see violence on the news, remind them it is only a picture on the TV. You might say, "This happened many, many miles away. You are safe."
- Avoid repeated viewings of the same event. Your child may think it's happening again. After 9/11, children who saw multiple news reports often thought more buildings were falling down, again and again.

Call Parent Line on 1300 1300 52 to get advice and support tailored to your situation.