

# How To Frame Tragedy In Language Children Can Understand



## Tips for Communicating with Children

### Preventative Steps

- Keep children away from adult media! They aren't capable of processing information which is usually presented in a provocative or outrage-inducing manner to encourage clicks/engagement in adult viewers.
- Mentally prepare yourself in advance for difficult topics so you aren't caught off guard by the subject when it arises; kids WILL have questions after learning about scary or unsettling events. *It's important to frame these topics and have planned responses to keep the discovery of tragic events from becoming personal childhood trauma.*

### Age Group and Temperament Guidelines

- Identify child's age: there is a different recommended approach for each age group.
  - Children from 2-6 have very little ability to grasp complexity and abstract concepts. *Find out what they know; validate their feelings as natural; break down the event using simple language and ideas/concepts they are already familiar using; provide reassurance they are physically safe and under no imminent threat.*
  - Children from 7-12 years are most likely to be exposed to age-inappropriate content now that they can read and are beginning to grasp abstract concepts. *Find out what they know; create a safe space for discussion or initiate the conversation if you sense something amiss; address how you/they feel without judgement; identify their curiosity; encourage critical thinking; provide context for the situation.*
  - Teens are invariably exposed to adult subject matter as they navigate social media and the physical world with far less supervision; they also create online content. *They are often more interested in the opinions of friends and online influences than engaging in what they may perceive of as lecture. It's important not to position yourself as an authority; admit when you don't have a clear answer; ask them open-ended questions and support their opinions even if you agree to disagree; encourage them to see the nuances of a situation and how to understand media "spin"; ask them to consider their own solutions to difficult experiences and how they can plan and react to situations as they arise.*
- Identify the child's temperament: some children are highly sensitive with little ability to filter emotionally laden information while others have better capacity to process complex topics. Some children will be satisfied with a few answers, while some may ask many to help them build perspective on the event/news.

## Address the Issue/Topic of Concern

- Differentiate between the event being discussed and the child's self (i.e., explain that the event occurred elsewhere or at another time, and is not a direct threat to the child). It's important that they understand when it isn't about them.
- Ensure that stories are told with a debrief on the salient topics; children will remember only the scary and/or exciting parts of the story being related to them, while other facts, such as time, place, and context will typically be forgotten, especially with younger children. This makes many children feel at risk where no threat is present.
- Keep the messages clear and simple by using appropriate pictures and visual aids where necessary.
- Use the opportunity to increase cultural empathy without placing blame and overwhelming responsibility on the child.
- Share your own feelings and values, check your own biases as they arise, and encourage the child to develop their own ideas through discussion and processing the information.

## Give Permission to Explore Their Feelings on the Subject

- Give them an opportunity to express themselves creatively (drawing / art material / acting / kinesthetic activity) to allow them to process their emotions.
- Show them you don't know everything by seeking out age-appropriate news sources to help you both learn more about the subject.
- If possible, find ways of empowering them to respond proactively in dangerous or threatening situations.
- Provide positive feedback and validate their feelings.

## A REMINDER - One Conversation is Usually Not Sufficient

- This crucial step is often overlooked as a part of helping the child process and frame overwhelming societal issues in a way that will allow them to develop empathy and the ability to think and problem solve with confidence instead of interpreting "bad/scary" news as a threat; vicarious trauma may arise from not having the tools to process tragic events and news beyond the child's maturity level. Revisit the topic to determine the child's level of understanding/comprehension – it's important to understand what information children have retained from the earlier conversation so you can correct any misconceptions.

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