

Disasters, the media and your child



When natural disasters occur in Australia, or man made disasters occur elsewhere in the world, they are often given constant media coverage. It can seem like every time you turn on the TV there is more news about the event, who has been hurt and what is happening now.

Media coverage during times of disaster is important. It can help to provide people who have been affected by the disaster with news and information about where to go, how to access help and when it is safe to return to their homes. However, many people, including children and families, can become absorbed by the constant news stream about the disaster and sometimes watch or listen for hours.

We know that during times of disaster children need to be protected and kept in mind. This can also mean not allowing them to have too much access to media coverage about the disaster.

The impacts

When disasters are being shown on TV, or covered on the radio or on the internet, parents really need to be mindful about how much exposure their child has to this. The media often focus on the most frightening aspects of a disaster and this coverage can often contain graphic, scary and disturbing images. Seeing this type of media coverage can cause distress or worry for children and adolescents. Children and young people will also often discuss what they have seen in the media with each other, so even though your child may not be seeing it on TV, they are still exposed to it by their friends.

Some of the ways that this sort of media coverage can impact on children and young people are:

- » It can lead to children and young people thinking a lot about the disaster and this can impact on their sleep and their time at school.
- » It can cause worry and anxiety that the same sort of disaster may happen to them or their family
- » It can lead them to generally feel that they are unsafe and that something bad may happen to them or their family.

The more media coverage a child or young person sees, the more likely it is that they will become afraid or upset.

Disasters, the media and your child

Helping your child

It is important that parents, carers and other family members help children and young people to cope with the media coverage that they may see of a disaster.

Some ways that you can do this include:

- » Restricting the amount of time that children and young people are able to watch TV or internet coverage of the disaster.
- » Making sure that you are there with your child when they are watching coverage of a disaster. This way you can talk to them about their fears and answer any questions that they may have.
- » Distracting your child from the media coverage by doing something else with them, such as watching a different TV show or playing a game.
- » Helping your child to understand what has happened and why it has happened and providing information on how likely this is to happen to you and your family.
- » Reminding your child that while what is happening in the disaster is upsetting, there are also lots of good things happening in the world, though these do not always receive the same level of media coverage.
- » Helping to remind your child that they are safe and that you are there to answer any of their questions and provide comfort to them if they are feeling unsafe.
- » Giving support to your child when upset, answering their questions and comforting them with physical affection.

Talking to your child and making sure that you continue to follow the normal routines and rhythms of your daily life are important ways to help your child feel safe and secure. Keep in mind that if your child does 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.

For more information

The Trauma & Grief Network: Supporting families

www.tgn.anu.edu.au

This tipsheet has been written by Professor Beverley Raphael and Amanda Harris.

Professor Beverley Raphael is a Psychiatrist, Head of the Academic Unit of Psychiatry and Addiction Medicine at the Australian National University and Chairperson of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network.

Amanda Harris is a Psychologist and the Director of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network.