

Q&A: News about violence affects children's mental and emotional health: How to discuss bad news with your children

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Violent photos and videos—whether from conflicts abroad or shootings near home—are commonplace, even ubiquitous, on television and social

media today. The impact on children can be debilitating.

SciLine interviewed [Dr. Robin Gurwitch](#), a psychologist and professor in the department of psychiatry and [behavioral sciences](#) at Duke University Medical Center, who discussed how these images and stories affect a child's mental and [emotional health](#); how the conversation about war and violence differs with [young children](#), tweens and teens; and how to recognize signs that children are struggling with recent events.

Below are some highlights from the discussion. Answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.

How do images and stories about war and violence affect children's mental and emotional health?

The very short answer is, it's not good. These events take a toll on our youth. We know from much academic [work in this area](#) that we see an increase in anxiety, in worries, in fears, in depression and, sometimes, an increase in anger. We see an increased sense of hopelessness, and then, at the extreme, an increase in risk for suicide.

How should parents prepare for a conversation with their children about hate and hate crimes, war and violence?

Before we even begin to talk to our children, as adults we have to put in place our thoughts and feelings. What are the values and beliefs that we hold in the face of these types of events? Talk to friends and other trusted relatives to make sure that you have a handle on your emotions.

What specific advice do you have for talking to very

young children—and to older children?

With really young children, under [preschool age](#) and younger, they probably don't know and won't understand what's going on. Yet they [can sense your distress](#). So making sure you keep their routines as consistent as possible will be helpful.

When we start talking about school-age children—assume they know. They've heard about it on the school bus. They've heard about it from friends. They've [seen it on TV](#) when they've walked through the living room.

With them, I think you start the conversation saying, "There's been ...". And then fill in the event you're going to talk about. "There's been a shooting in Maine." "There's been a hurricane in Mexico." "There's been a [terrorist attack](#) in Israel and now there's a war, and that's really hard, but I want to talk to you about it. Tell me what you've heard about it."

Allow them to have that ability to tell you what they've heard. Listen for and gently correct misinformation, rumors and misinterpretations. And then follow that up with, "How is that making you feel?" As they share their feelings with you, accept those rather than try to talk them out of them. It doesn't work for adults, and it won't work for children.

What specific advice do you have for talking to tweens and teens?

Sometimes when we talk or try to talk to our tweens and teens, they give us the shoulder shrug, or they say, "I'm fine," or nothing, or "Why do I need to tell you what I think?" So sometimes we may [take a different approach with them](#).

Instead of saying, "Tell me what you know about the war happening between Israel and Hamas," you may phrase it a little differently and say, "You know, the war between Israel and Hamas has been going on for several weeks. Tell me what your friends are saying about that," or "What are you seeing on social media about the war?"

This approach gives them a little bit of distance from you. That is, they may be more willing to share about their friends and social media. And it gives you some insight on what they understand, what they believe, and gives you an opportunity to check in about any misperceptions or misinformation that they may have.

What specific advice do you have for talking to college students?

There's still a tether that binds the two of you as they're continuing to grow into their own person. So, it is important to reach out. "Tell me what's happening on campus related to the war in Israel and Gaza. What are professors saying? What are your classmates saying?" Check in to make sure that they feel safe and supported. And to let them know that you are there if they have any concerns, or any worries about anything, to give you a call and you'll talk it through with them.

How can parents monitor their children's media diet and social media use while respecting their privacy?

When we're talking about [school-age children](#), [parents](#) and caregivers truly need to know what their social media is all about. They need to look at it. They need to make sure that it's appropriate.

As children get older, they do [expect a little bit more privacy](#). But I think it's important for parents to say, "You know, I've heard from other

parents"—you can throw other parents under the bus—"I've heard from other parents that there's a lot of things on social media about the war in Israel," or whatever the topic is. And let them know that oftentimes there are things on social media that just aren't true. And to come to you if they have any questions about what they're seeing or hearing, and you'll tell them what you know to be true.

Also tell them that sometimes there are images that no one should see. If they see them, tell them to come to you so you can talk it through with them. Acknowledge that while their friends are seeing it, and they may be drawn to it, this can interfere with their sleep and their focus, because those images are hard to get out of our minds.

What are some signs and symptoms that children or teens may be struggling with recent events?

We may see [sleep problems](#). Either problems falling asleep or staying asleep, so they may be more tired. Because of that and because of other reactions to stress, children may be more irritable.

Younger children may have more meltdowns and temper tantrums, and even our tweens and teens—where we expect some of it—it'll be above and beyond. We may see more conflict between you and your children, but also between your [children](#) and their peers.

We may see a lack of enjoyment with the things that they used to really look forward to or want to do. Sometimes we see problems with attention and focus and concentration. That can lead to difficulties with schoolwork. It's not that they're not studying hard. It's not that they're not trying their best. But being able to process and retain new information becomes really hard.

So a little bit of extra patience, maybe a little bit more help, attention and love really will go a long way these days.

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