

# How to Help Children Cope With Frightening News

By Gemma Alexander |

**Editor's note:** This article was sponsored by [THIRA Health](#).

Our top priority as parents is to keep our kids safe and feeling secure. But it's not easy to steer kids away from scary stories about the pandemic, the presidential election, racial injustice and civil unrest. Even if your family is lucky enough to not be directly impacted by these things, completely shielding your child from frightening news may not be the best way to prepare them for life. So, how do you help your child navigate news that can be overwhelming even for grown-ups? Fortunately, it's not as daunting as you might think.

## Talk about it

Don't wait until your child brings it up or begins to show signs of anxiety. With social media, kids are bombarded with more headlines at younger ages than ever. Even if your child doesn't have a smartphone, their classmates are talking about what they've heard at home, just as your own child is hearing your adult conversations about major events that may affect your family's daily life. Instead of leaving them to figure things out on their own, take the opportunity to frame the subject yourself.

When you talk about scary news stories, there are three things to remember:

1. Be calm.
2. Be positive.
3. Be empowering.

## Be calm

It's hard to be calm when you yourself are shocked, scared or outraged. But when you explain things to your kids, it's important to be matter of fact. The specific event may be unprecedented, but bad news itself is a fact of life.

"It goes against our grain, and against our natural instinct, but it helps develop resilience if we are able in the moment to really accept and acknowledge what's going on," says Mehri Moore, M.D., founder and chief medical officer of [THIRA Health](#), a treatment center created exclusively for women and girls who struggle with anxiety, depression and eating disorders..

It's also helpful to remind yourself and your child that you don't have to solve every bad thing that is going on. Some problems are not yours to fix. "You just have to survive them. We have to continue focusing on our survival or our ability to tolerate these adversities," says Moore.

## Be positive

While honesty about hard truths is the best policy, there is no need to dwell on negativity.

“Refocus the kids from violence and unnecessary images to focus on the things that are positive. You don’t have to deny what is going on, but emphasize the things that are actually positive,” says Moore.

This approach is about more than distraction.

“In the process of emphasizing the positive, you also employ a strategy to regulate your emotions,” says Moore. And your children will learn to copy this calming, refocusing approach from you.

It is possible to be honest with your children while remaining positive by moving the narrative from the horrific to the heroic. For example, instead of emphasizing the danger of a seditious uprising, focus on the actions of [the officer who drew the crowd away](#) from the Senate chambers. When you talk about the pandemic, you can acknowledge the danger, but also emphasize the efforts of the thousands of people who are working to heal the sick and to develop and distribute a vaccine.

## Empower

“When you feel helpless, it’s easy to give in and feel like you are a victim,” says Moore. So, although it’s valuable to absolve our kids from feeling as though they have to solve problems outside their control, we also need to help them feel that they can make a difference.

For younger kids, that comes from the stories of adults’ heroic actions and positive outcomes. For adolescents who are already online and getting their own information, as well as some support from a community of their peers, the parents’ role involves more listening. Ask, “How are you coping with this? What do you think about this? What do your friends think about what happened? What would you do if you were in that situation? If you were in a position of power?”

“In essence, you are really helping them to feel, in a proximal way, empowered to do something good to help other people. That is an important intervention that you can make, and in the long run it helps them in a time of stress or adversity by having the ability to visualize a different mode rather than a feeling of helplessness,” says Moore.

## Adapt and move on

“We are in a situation that nobody has control over, but we know that the biggest factor in trying to withstand adversity for adults is to be able to employ strategies of positive behavior and positive thinking,” says Moore. “How do we extricate ourselves from it and move towards the positive behavior that helps us adapt and move away from this anxiety?”

The multiple stressors of current events present an opportunity for us as parents to help our kids grow into resilient and adaptable adults. We can teach our kids that by exercising control in situations where they have it — for example, by wearing

masks during a pandemic — they are not victims of circumstance. And we can help them build habits of positive behavior, such as stepping away from the screens when they've had enough. For parents and kids alike, eating right, playing games, spending time outdoors engaging in healthy activities, and building relationships with friends and family, even when it has to be at a physical distance, are all strategies to make the endless cycle of bad news more manageable.

For many children, the source of anxiety is not the headline itself, but the behavior and actions of adults around them. Children become anxious when adults are panic-stricken and out of control.

“It is really important to care for yourself, not only regulating your emotions but also in a physical and spiritual sense. Focus on things in your life that are meaningful and purposeful and that are hopeful, to be able to communicate to your kids that sense of hopefulness,” says Moore.

And if you find that anxiety is blocking positivity for you or for your child, or that isn't going away after a few days or that it is interfering with your ability to function, do not be afraid to seek help. Start with your primary care provider or your pediatrician for specific strategies to manage anxiety or to get a referral to a specialist. Getting help when your family needs it is a powerful strategy for overcoming headline anxiety.

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