

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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CHILDREN AND THE NEWS

Children often see or hear the news many times a day through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Seeing and hearing about local and world events, such as natural disasters, catastrophic events, and crime reports, may cause children to experience stress, anxiety, and fears.

There have also been several changes in how news is reported that have given rise to the increased potential for children to experience negative effects. These changes include the following:

- television channels and Internet services and sites which report the news 24 hours a day
- television channels broadcasting live events as they are unfolding, in “real time”
- increased reporting of the details of the private lives of public figures and role models
- pressure to get news to the public as part of the competitive nature of the entertainment industry
- detailed and repetitive visual coverage of natural disasters and violent acts

While there has been great public debate about providing television ratings to warn parents about violence and sex in regular programming, news shows have only recently been added to these discussions. Research has shown that children and adolescents are prone to imitate what they see and hear in the news, a kind of contagion effect described as “copy cat” events. Chronic and persistent exposure to such violence can lead to fear, desensitization (numbing), and in some children an increase in aggressive and violent behaviors. Studies also show that media broadcasts do not always choose to show things that accurately reflect local or national trends.

For example, statistics report a decrease in the incidence of crime, yet, the reporting of crime in the news has increased 240 percent. Local news shows often lead with or break into programming to announce crime reports and devote as much as 30 percent of the broadcast time to detailed crime reporting.

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The possible negative effects of news can be lessened by parents, teachers, or other adults by watching the news with the child and talking about what has been seen or heard. The child’s age, maturity, developmental level, life experiences, and vulnerabilities should guide how much and what kind of news the child watches.

Guidelines for minimizing the negative effects of watching the news include:

- monitor the amount of time your child watches news shows
- make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to the child
- watch the news with your child
- ask the child what he/she has heard and what questions he/she may have
- provide reassurance regarding his/her own safety in simple words emphasizing that you are going to be there to keep him/her safe
- look for signs that the news may have triggered fears or anxieties such as sleeplessness, fears, bedwetting, crying, or talking about being afraid

Parents should remember that it is important to talk to the child or adolescent about what he/she has seen or heard. This allows parents to lessen the potential negative effects of the news and to discuss their own ideas and values. While children cannot be completely protected from outside events, parents can help them feel safe and help them to better understand the world around them.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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