

KEY FACTS

Spring 2003

Children and the News: Coping with Terrorism, War and Everyday Violence

As television coverage of global conflict has escalated in recent years, so has concern about children witnessing horrific images of terrorism and war on the news. The Oklahoma City bombings, the 1991 Gulf War, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and the 2003 Iraq war have all been broadcast – sometimes live – into the living rooms of millions of families across the country. Even when the United States is not at war or under attack, the news can be a scary experience for many children, with stories of sniper attacks on innocent civilians in the D.C. area, the murder of a pregnant woman, the kidnapping of a young girl from her bedroom late at night, and shootings of children in schools.

Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all answer as to what is appropriate for children to see in the news, and what makes sense for a mature 16-year-old may be very different from what is appropriate for a five-year-old. All children are different, so that even those who are the same age may have a very different response to disturbing news. But given the prevalence of news media coverage of violent or catastrophic events, helping young people cope with their exposure to television news is critical.

A significant number of children regularly watch the news. Even if children do not select the news themselves, they may still see or hear news stories because their parents are watching.¹ There has been far less scientific research about children's exposure to the news than there has been about entertainment media, whether it is video game violence, drugs and alcohol in the movies, or gender stereotypes on television. This fact sheet is designed to bring together the most relevant research that has been conducted about the impact of news on children, in times of war and in times of relative peace.

Children and News about Terrorism and War

- For the majority of American children, the real-life horrors of terrorism and war are viewed as images on the TV screen. Watching these tragic events televised can be overwhelming for children and make them feel upset and unsafe.² It is difficult to determine, however, whether exposure to disturbing news images can make some children more anxious and fearful or whether children who are already distressed choose to watch the TV coverage.³
- Watching an event replayed repeatedly can increase stress and anxiety among young children who may think that the catastrophe is happening over and over again because they cannot distinguish between live pictures and replays.⁴
- After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, complaints about replaying graphic images of the planes striking the World Trade Center and the towers collapsing led the networks to reconsider their coverage. ABC imposed a ban on replaying the images and instead used still photos, and other networks limited the use of the video footage.⁵
- Watching extensive news coverage of horrific events can contribute to posttraumatic stress. However, there is debate about whether disturbing televised images alone can lead to these symptoms. It may be that news images trigger symptoms among children who suffered previous trauma in their lives, or are sensitive to their parents' fears and anxieties.⁶
- Mental health experts recommend that commemorating an anniversary of an event can be therapeutic, but caution that extensive coverage to mark remembrances of catastrophes such as 9/11 may re-evolve the horror of the experience, especially for young viewers.⁷

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How did children react to news coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks?

Youth throughout the United States

According to a national study conducted a few days after 9/11 with parents of children ages 5 to 18:⁸

- On average, children watched 3 hours of TV news on the day of the attacks. Younger children ages 5 to 8 watched 1 hour or less and older teens ages 17 or 18 watched 5 hours or more. Only 8% did not watch any coverage on September 11th.⁹
- One-third of parents (34%) limited their children's exposure to coverage of the terrorist attacks, especially for younger children and children who exhibited stress symptoms.¹⁰
- Almost half of parents (47%) said their children expressed worry about their own safety or the safety of a loved one, and more than one-third (35%) reported their children experiencing one or more symptoms of stress, such as avoiding talking or hearing about the event, trouble concentrating or sleeping, being irritable or losing their tempers. Parents who did not restrict their children's TV viewing reported them having more stress symptoms the more TV they watched.¹¹
- Parents or another adult in the household talked about the attacks more with older children and with children who watched more TV coverage. Eighty-four percent of parents discussed the attacks with their children for one hour or more.¹²

Guidelines for Journalists

Following are some suggestions for coverage of tragic or traumatic events, from experts at New York University's Child Study Center*:

- Provide a warning about graphic content
- Put the event in perspective by explaining the likelihood of such tragedies occurring in everyday life
- Provide information about what children and families can do to help others
- Limit size, amount and repetition of graphic content
- Limit use of intense graphics in news promotions or front pages
- Avoid eye-witness reports from those still openly grieving or in shock
- Describe safety measures to prevent future occurrences
- Limit replaying images on anniversaries, as children may re-experience fright

* *Child Sensitive Media Coverage of Trauma and Tragedy*, www.aboutourkids.org/articles/child_sensitive_media.html

New York City Youth

Six months after the 9/11 attacks, the New York City Board of Education commissioned a major assessment of the mental health needs of New York City public school children in grades 4-12:¹³

- Almost two-thirds (62%) said they spent a lot of their time and another third (33%) some of their time learning about the 9/11 attacks from TV; about 75% increased their newspaper and magazine reading and more than 30% accessed the Internet for more information.¹⁴
- Among an estimated 10.5% (75,000) of students suffering from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder six months after 9/11, including children who were not directly affected by the event, the prevalence of stress was higher among children who spent more time learning about the attacks from TV than children who spent less time.¹⁵

Washington, DC Youth

- In the days following 9/11, more than 8 in 10 (85%) Washington, DC elementary school children indicated that their basic sense of security and safety was shaken by the terrorist attacks, which may be linked to their extensive viewing of TV coverage of the attacks.¹⁶

How did children react to news coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing?

- Youth who watched a lot of bomb-related TV coverage were more likely to report posttraumatic stress, even if they did not see, hear or feel the explosion first-hand or personally know someone injured or killed in the explosion.¹⁷
- Youth who experienced the bombing largely through TV coverage reported trauma-related stress for over two years.¹⁸

How did children react to news coverage of the 1991 Persian Gulf War?

- Roughly half (45%) of parents interviewed about their children's reactions to news stories about the Gulf War reported that the coverage had upset, disturbed or frightened their child.¹⁹
- Younger children were more disturbed by visual images of planes dropping bombs and people dying, whereas older children and teens were more upset by abstract threats of terrorism and nuclear war or the possibility of the conflict spreading.²⁰
- The more coverage children watched, the more upset they were about the war and concerned for themselves and for people directly affected by the war. Girls and younger children were especially concerned about their personal safety.²¹

- Boys and girls focused on different aspects of the war coverage. Boys watched more news stories about the background and technology of war, whereas girls were more interested in the human side of war and also avoided watching coverage more than boys.²²
- When asked why they watched the news during the Gulf War, 3rd-6th graders offered three main reasons: roughly one-third (33%) enjoyed the exciting aspects of the war such as bombing and shooting; one-quarter (26%) wanted to stay informed about the events of the war; and one-fifth (20%) needed reassurance that everything was okay and the United States was winning.²³
- The types of news stories that frighten children differ with age. Younger children ages 3-7 are more frightened by stories of natural disasters and accidents, whereas older children ages 8-12 are more scared by stories about crime and violence.³²

Children's Experience with TV News in Times of Relative Peace

- Children of all ages watch the news, but older children, especially boys, are more likely to watch and they have a better understanding of the purpose of a news program and the news stories than younger children. Children who are older also are more likely to discuss news with their parents.²⁴

How does watching news usually affect children?

- Almost 4 in 10 (37%) parents report that their children have been frightened or upset by something they have seen in the news and concerned that it can happen to them or their family.²⁵
- While children tend to be less frightened by violent images in TV shows and movies as they grow older, this is not true for news.²⁶ Older children are more likely to think that TV news is scary, say it makes them feel anxious, worried or afraid, and express concern over their personal safety when describing a news story.²⁷
- In a national poll of 11-16 year olds, 50% said that they felt angry, afraid, sad or depressed after watching, reading or hearing about the news. Girls tend to be more emotionally affected by news stories than boys,²⁸ and generally find TV news to be more frightening regardless of their age.²⁹
- Children who watch a lot of TV news tend to overestimate the prevalence of crime and may perceive the world to be a more dangerous place than it actually is.³⁰

Which types of news stories are most upsetting to children?

- Children are most frightened by news about violence between strangers such as shootings, killings, kidnappings and sexual assaults, particularly ones involving a child or teenage victim, followed by stories about war and famine in a foreign place, and natural disasters such as earthquakes and tornadoes.³¹

Guidelines for Parents

Following are suggestions for helping children cope with news coverage of traumatic events, from the 'recommended resources' listed below:

- Limit children's exposure to graphic news images, especially replays of traumatic events. Consider not allowing young children to watch news, and monitoring older children's exposure to news.
- When kids watch news, watch with them and talk about what they see and how it makes them feel.
- Reassure children of their safety and let them know that everything possible is being done to protect them.
- Maintain daily routines and rituals to provide a sense of security.
- Take positive action: volunteer and participate in community events, make a donation, write letters in support of efforts that share your values.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

(Those with an asterisk * are available in English and Spanish or other languages)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*

<http://www.aacap.org/publications/disasterresponse/index.htm>

Talking to Children about Terrorism and War; Children and the News

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org/terrorism/topics/parents.pdf>
Children, Terrorism & Disasters Toolkit

American Psychiatric Association

<http://www.psych.org/disaster/20tipsparents11801.cfm>
Talking to Children about War and Terrorism: 20 Tips for Parents

Children Now

<http://www.childrennow.org/television/twk-news.htm>
Talking with Kids about the News

National Association of School Psychologists

http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/children_war_general.html
Children and Fear of War and Terrorism: Tips for Parents and Teachers

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center*

http://www.nccev.org/violence/children_terrorism.htm
Children and Terrorism

Nemours Foundation Center for Health Media - KidsHealth*

<http://www.kidshealth.org>
Worrying about War: Parents, Kids and Teens

- ¹ Over the past few decades, research studies have consistently shown that one-third or more of children regularly watch the news. Stacy Smith and Barbara Wilson, "Children's Comprehension of and Fear Reactions to Television News," *Media Psychology* 4 (2002):1-26; Dan Drew and Byron Reeves, "Children and TV News," *Journalism Quarterly* 57 (1978):45-54,114; Charles Atkin, "Broadcast News Programming and the Child Audience," *Journal of Broadcasting* 22 (1978):47-61; Children Now, *Tuned In or Tuned Out? America's Children Speak Out on the News Media* (Oakland, CA: Children Now, 1994), <<http://www.childrennow.org/media/mc94/news.html>> (19 April 2003).
- ² See, for example, Joanne Cantor, "Mommy, I'm Scared:" *How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 111-123.
- ³ See, for example, Schuster, M. A., B. D. Stein, L. H. Jaycox, R. L. Collins, G. N. Marshall, M. N. Elliott, A. J. Zhou, D. E. Kanouse, J. L. Morrison, S. H. Berry, "A National Survey of Stress Reactions After the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks," *New England Journal of Medicine* 345 (November 15, 2001)20:1507-1512; Betty Pfefferbaum, Sara Jo Nixon, Rick D. Tivis, Debby E. Doughty, Robert S. Pynoos, Robin H. Gurwitch, and David W. Foy, "Television Exposure in Children after a Terrorist Incident," *Psychiatry* 64 (Fall 2001)3: 202-211.
- ⁴ Center for the Advancement of Health, "One Year Later: Post-traumatic Stress Takes Toll on Children," *Facts of Life: Issue Briefings for Health Reporters*, Vol. 7, no. 9 (September 2002), <<http://www.cfah.org/hbns/factsoflife/vol7no9.cfm>> (7 April 2003); Joanne Cantor, "Helping Children Cope: Advice in the Aftermath of the Terrorist Attacks on America," <http://www.joannecantor.com/terror_adv.html> (17 April 2003).
- ⁵ David Bauder, "The Violent Images of 9-11 Will Return to Television Screens, But to What Extent?" *Boston Globe* (September 11, 2002), <http://www.boston.com/news/packages/sept11/anniversary/wire_stories/0908_tv.htm> (7 April 2003).
- ⁶ See, for example, Michael Jonathan Grinfeld, "Achieving Balance in 9/11 Media Coverage," *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. XIX, Issue 9 (September 2002), <<http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/p020901a.html>> (7 April 2003); Anita Gurian and Robin Goodman, "9/11 a Year Later – How are New York City Children Doing?" New York University Child Study Center, About Our Kids. <http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/9_11ayearlater.html> (17 April 2003).
- ⁷ Michael Jonathan Grinfeld, Matt Crenson, "Anxiety over Terrorism Lingers," *Chicago Sun Times Special Report* (August 21, 2002), <http://www.suntimes.com/special_sections/sept11/nation/psychological.html> (7 April 2003).
- ⁸ Schuster, et al., 1507-1512.
- ⁹ Ibid., 1510.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Applied Research and Consulting LLC, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and New York State Psychiatric Institute, *Effects of the World Trade Center Attack on New York City Public School Students: Initial Report to the New York City Board of Education* (May 6, 2002):3, 28-29, <http://www.nycenet.edu/offices/spss/wtc_needs/firstrep.pdf> (7 April 2003).
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 3, 28-29.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 36.
- ¹⁶ Tom Kenny, "Study Examines 9/11 Effects on Children," *The Hoya* (May 17, 2002), <<http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/psychology/News/9.11study.html>> (14 April 2003).
- ¹⁷ Betty Pfefferbaum, Sara Jo Nixon, Rick D. Tivis, Debby E. Doughty, Robert S. Pynoos, Robin H. Gurwitch, and David W. Foy, "Television Exposure in Children after a Terrorist Incident," *Psychiatry* 64 (Fall 2001)3: 202-211.; Betty Pfefferbaum, Sara Jo Nixon, P. Tucker, Rick D. Tivis, V. Morre, Robin H. Gurwitch, Robert S. Pynoos. and H. Geis, "Posttraumatic Stress Responses in Bereaved Children After the Oklahoma City Bombing," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 38(November 1999): 1372-1379.
- ¹⁸ B. Pfefferbaum, T.W. Seale, N.B. McDonald, et al. "Posttraumatic Stress Two Years after the Oklahoma City Bombing in Youths Geographically Distant from the Explosion," *Psychiatry* 63(2000):358-70
- ¹⁹ Joanne Cantor, Marie Louise Mares, and Mary Beth Oliver, "Parents and Children's Emotional Reactions to TV Coverage of the Gulf War," *Desert Storm and the Mass Media*, eds. B. Greenberg and W. Gantz (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 324-340.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Cynthia Hoffner and Margaret Haefner, "Children's Responses to News Coverage about the War," *Desert Storm and the Mass Media*, eds. B. Greenberg and W. Gantz (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 364-380.
- ²² Cynthia Hoffner and Margaret Haefner, "Children's News Interest during the Gulf War: The Role of Negative Affect," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (Spring 1994):193-204.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Smith and Wilson.
- ²⁵ Joanne Cantor and Amy Nathanson, "Children's Fright Reactions to Television News," *Journal of Communication* (Autumn 1996):139-152.
- ²⁶ Joanne Cantor, "The Media and Children's Fears, Anxieties, and Perceptions of Danger," *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. D. Singer and J. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 207-222.
- ²⁷ Smith and Wilson; Cantor and Nathanson.
- ²⁸ Children Now.
- ²⁹ Smith and Wilson.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Cantor and Nathanson.
- ³² Ibid.

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