

# I Dread Explaining Scary News to My Sons, So Experts Told

## Me How To

This is one of the harder sides of parenting.

 Raúl Vázquez / EyeEm / Getty Images

It's no secret that there's a lot of scary stuff happening in the world. And if you're a parent, it's likely that at some point, your kids will hear about events like the devastating bombing this week at the [Ariana Grande concert](#) in Manchester, England.

Naturally, this can leave parents wondering: Do we need to talk with our children about these terrifying incidents? And, if so, how the hell are we supposed to do it?

My sons are young, and my husband and I make it a point to keep conversations around them light, especially since Miles, our 4-year-old, picks up on everything. He loves being silly and cracks up over little things like accidentally putting on mismatched socks. He also talks endlessly about Legos and joining the Paw Patrol, a heroic group of rescue dogs in an animated Nickelodeon show of the same name, when he's older. His world is simple, fun, and uncomplicated, and the biggest thing he worries about is whether his BFF will be at preschool on any given day.

Miles knows that "bad guys" exist, but he thinks Batman will just swoop in and save the day every time (and, if not, Miles believes his own "Spiderman hands" will). I dread the day that I'll have to help him understand that, while life can be amazing, it can also be terrible. Bad things happen to good people, too—even children—and I know that knowledge will shatter his sheltered and sunny view of the world.

## **Death and destruction aren't things that most kids can get their head around, at least not in any real sense.**

A few weeks ago, there was a fire in my neighborhood, and my husband and I used it to talk about fire safety with Miles. We went over a plan of what to do if there is a fire in our own house, and why it's so important to get away from fire quickly. But Miles has become fascinated with "the burning house"—he regularly asks questions about it and wants to walk by it daily. Even though we've repeatedly explained that a family lost their house and it's awful, all he can see is a "cool"-looking charred shell of a house and the fact the firefighters (his heroes) came to help.

Kids tend to view the world through a Disney lens, and the idea of talking to them about the awful things that happen in the world on a regular basis can make any parent understandably terrified that they'll shatter that innocence, or even cause their kids to suffer from undue anxiety. Trust me, I'm right there with you.

## **But experts say that after your kids reach a certain age, it's crucial to discuss these things with them.**

"They are undoubtedly going to hear about these events from other sources, and a good parenting practice is to establish that you are the best source of trusted and reliable information," clinical psychologist John Mayer, Ph.D., author of *Family Fit: Find Your Balance in Life*, tells SELF.

By doing this, you establish a safe and secure house for them where questions aren't off-limits, and set you and your partner, if you have one, up as the sources for real information. Talking about scary world events can also help kids process them and make sense of what happened, Miami-area licensed clinical psychologist Erika Martinez, Psy.D., tells SELF. "Not talking about it makes the scary things scarier," she says.

Of course, you're probably not tempted to discuss Kim Jong Un's nuclear bomb-testing with your 4-year-old, and psychologist Paul Coleman, Psy.D., author of *Finding Peace When Your Heart is in Pieces*, tells SELF that's appropriate. If your child is around preschool age or you're confident he or she hasn't heard a piece of news like this, you don't necessarily need to tell them about it, he says. But there's a catch.

"If the child brings it up or if you observed the child overhearing the news, you should bring up the topic," Coleman says. Gail Saltz, M.D., a psychiatrist and the author of *The Power of Different*, agrees. "Things that rise to the level of awareness for them should be acknowledged and discussed," she tells SELF. "This may vary depending on age and how plugged in they are."

Failing to talk to your kids about scary news when they're aware of it can also let their imaginations run wild, Saltz points out. If a child hears about the Manchester bombing, for example, they could assume that something like that will happen at their school or a concert that they would attend. Without you to help put that into context—namely, pointing out that this is a rarity—they could live in fear of this happening to them.

**Constant fear and stress are very damaging to children, which is why it's so important that you're on top of their awareness of scary news.**

"They need to feel as safe as one can reasonably feel," Coleman says. "Constant fear teaches them that they cannot trust, that they must be on guard." And, since they're kids, they don't have the ability to protect themselves, so they will also feel helpless, he says. Mayer agrees. Living in constant fear will "crush" children psychologically, he says, adding that it will cause them to "emotionally and behaviorally hide from life." It's on parents, then, to help ease their minds as much as possible.

That doesn't mean you should talk to your child about every bad thing that happens—Mayer says you'll want to pick and choose the events that make the most sense, and try to leave bias out of it. For example, the horrific Manchester bombing impacted children, so it's more likely that they'll hear about it from classmates at school.

Complexities of something like the AHCA, on the other hand, are probably not worth discussing unless your children are in their late teens or specifically ask about it.

### **The actual conversation you have with your child about scary news needs to be tailored to them.**

Martinez recommends figuring out where their head is before you dive in, since it's possible that they know less than you'd think. Try asking questions like, "What do you think this news means?" and "Why do you think this happens?" to get a sense of where they're coming from. "Provide answers but without the gory details," she says. "Kids don't need to know about [that level of] bloodshed."

If your child seems stressed or upset about an event, Coleman recommends following the acronym AFE: Take **action** (keep their usual routine going, and encourage them to do something for another person to show that people can do good things), **feel** feelings (let your child talk about their feelings, acknowledge them, and don't dismiss them), and **ease** minds (be reassuring).

The latter part is where your child's age comes into play. Coleman points out that children under 10 see the world in black and white and ambiguities like, "There's no way to guarantee that anyone is safe" wouldn't help. (However, he says, older kids and teens will understand and appreciate an honest answer like that.) All children can appreciate a statement like, "I wouldn't take you to the mall or school if I thought you would be in danger," but for younger kids, he also recommends saying something like, "A lot of very smart people are working hard to make sure we are all protected."

You can't control everything your kids are exposed to, but you can filter the bad things they hear about when they're with you. That's why Saltz recommends keeping limits on how much and what news is on in your house when your kids are around. But, if they do hear about scary news, it's up to you to help them through it. "Be honest when asked, be open to questions, and be understanding of fear, and reassuring but base it on realistic expectations," she says.