

INSIGHTS

Explaining scary world events to our children



Almost exactly two years ago our world changed in incomprehensible ways. It was supposed to be a couple of weeks. A month at most. We just had to isolate at home. Flatten the curve. Protect the vulnerable.

It meant working from home unless we were essential workers. It also meant school was at home. But it was an adventure. A reset. A chance to change things up and focus on what matters most; to help make a difference for our communities.

But despite a few bright patches where it really was good and our hope was high, it was also often bad. Our two most populous states endured the world's longest lockdowns. The borders stayed closed keeping loved ones separated.

It was a year of stuttering Zoom calls and classes, quarantine, mask mandates, vaccinations, protests, and for many parents and families, hellish challenges to balance all that family, work, and government restrictions required.

As 2022 commenced, QLD held students back from school for two extra weeks to encourage vaccinations. NSW and VIC required all students to be tested for COVID using at-home testing kits twice per week. It felt like COVID parenting was about to become more overwhelming than we could manage.

Now, barely into March, our lives are bombarded with stories – and for some, the reality – of flood waters inundating homes and lives being lost. And a conflict in Eastern Europe that many fear will become a war has begun.

It's enough to leave parents reeling. Except that many parents are already stressed out, burned out, and tired out. Parents have done all they can to hold things together. The difficulty – the unfairness of it all – is that we must keep on keeping on. Our children are relying on us.

What our children need right now

Our children *need* the world to feel safe and secure. The more they feel this, the more they can explore life with confidence, look to the future with hope, and find a meaningful way forward. And whether we are feeling it or not, it's up to us to provide them that safety and security. If not, the unpredictable nature of life can consume them with anxiety, fear, apprehension, and worry.

More information is *not* reassuring

Ever notice that getting more information does not reduce your worries and fears? Scrolling your news feeds doesn't offer reassurance. It's the same with your children. They don't need lots of information. They need to feel safe. And what we do makes a difference.

Kids are anxious. Here are 5 ways to help

parenting * ideas

Tune out media

Social media algorithms are designed to push more and more of what we see in our direction. The more you and your children watch these events occur online, the more they'll appear. Keep bad news away from your children – especially younger children – as much as possible.

Remember that emotions are contagious

If you are feeling emotional or overwhelmed, your child will sense it – and catch it. Taking a deep breath, and keeping level and stable will help you respond gently and patiently to your child.

If it's mentionable, it's manageable

Rather than asking your child "Are you ok?", say what you see. "Gee, you look pretty worried about things. What's on your mind?" Perhaps you could say, "I noticed you were pretty affected by that horrible news. It's hard to hear isn't it."

Side by side conversations

Rather than sitting face-to-face, talk with your children about their questions and concerns while side-by-side. Perhaps it's a car ride, beside their bed at night, or while you're doing an activity together. Side-by-side conversations feel less threatening.

Don't turn on the fire hose

When someone is thirsty, we don't put their face in front of the fire hose. We give them a glass of water. It's the same with our kids. Most of the time they don't want to (or can't) understand the magnitude of the bad news or even why it happened (if there's a reason at all). When you answer their questions, keep it simple, invite more questions, and answer the best you can. Kindness and gentle reassurance that you "get it" is typically enough.

In closing

Most of the time the world is a fabulous, beautiful place, but scary things happen from time to time. When they do, remind your child that this is unusual which is why it's in the news. As Rebecca Solnit eloquently described in her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, "Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper."

As this latest bad news strikes, let's notice that there are usually more people moving towards the disaster areas to help than there are leaving it due to stress and duress. Let's see the good, be part of it, and give our children hope for a better world.



Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson helps families be happier. His Goalcast and TEDx positive parenting videos have been viewed by more than 80 million people. He is the author of 6 parenting books and the cohost and parenting expert on Channel 9's Parental Guidance. He hosts Australia's #1 podcast for parents: Dr Justin Coulson's Happy Families. Justin and his wife, Kylie, are the parents of 6 daughters.