



# Three tips for helping children deal with frightening world events

By Michael Hawton, Child Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

As events of violence and terrorism are apparently being more regularly reported, an increasing number of children are being affected by exposure to these frightening stories. Many parents are wondering what they can do to protect their children from the effects of vicarious anxiety provoked by these media reports.

We need to recognise that we (parents) have the fully-adult, psychological minds and that we are able to plan, reason and organise our thoughts better than children who do not yet have fully developed minds; they won't have this mature mind until they reach their early twenties. Our children's minds then, are more prone to get distressed when they are exposed to frightening events compared to adults – particularly where they see images of people who are upset, scared and crying.

If part of our job as parents is to protect our children's well-being then we need to shield them from heavily publicised world events that might cause them fear and worry. As children hear more and more about distressing things, repetitive 'hearing' or 'viewing' can accumulate stress in their minds. Anxiety can build in other words.

So, my first tip is, once you've seen or heard a frightening world event, don't keep watching it over and over. Turn the TV off or turn the radio to another station. Try to minimize your children's exposure to the news of these events. Be especially aware that images seen on television (or video footage on online media platforms) have a particularly powerful effect on children, especially very young children. If you do need news updates, then maybe read about it privately online.

## Try to minimize your children's exposure to the news of these events

If they say they are worried about what they have seen my second tip is try and hear their feelings before moving on to another topic. You can listen to them by simply acknowledging what you believe they might be experiencing. Through this acknowledgement, you're giving them congruent emotional feedback, which is an essential element of helping children grow their emotional intelligence. Remember your acknowledgment of how they are feeling is not your agreement about how they are seeing things. Just tune-in to what they are saying and where you can, make statements about what you observe – 'So, seeing those people made you feel pretty worried that it could happen here' or 'If I saw something like that I think I would be upset too'.

## Help your children get things in proportion

Third tip. Help your children get things in proportion. In Australia and New Zealand we live in very safe societies. Without being Pollyanna about it, children need to be reminded that the news – particularly overseas news – represents only a tiny small slice of what is going on in the world. For

better or worse, the news tends to focus on the destructive, frightening and violent events which makes the news, well, news! As adults, we know that it's not a balanced picture of the world. Let your children know that where you live has been and will continue to be a generally safe place and that there are structures in place to keep everyone that way. Explain that the news event they may have seen is not happening everywhere. If it is something that happened overseas, explain that it is not happening in our country, our city or our neighbourhood.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>