

What to Say When Your Kid Asks About Scary News

By [Rachel Rabkin Pechman](#)

Every time I turn on the TV, it feels like I'm instantly bombarded with bad news, ranging from war in the Middle East to deadly natural disasters. So when it comes time for my daughter to watch, I choose kid-friendly stations only—ones that never even show a preview of the nightly news. At 3 years old, my little girl is far too young to be exposed to the tragedies of the world. Still, I wonder, at what age should I clue her in to some of the harsh realities around us—and what should I say to her?

Many parents wonder the same thing, especially considering that the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks is upon us. For guidance, we turned to Paul Coleman, Psy.D., clinical psychologist and author of *How to Say It to Your Child When Bad Things Happen*. Dr. Coleman strongly emphasizes that a parent's most important job is making sure a child feels safe and protected when trouble arises. Here, he tells us how and when to broach this kind of subject.

Parent & Child: Let's get right to it—should parents bring up 9/11 at all?

Dr. Paul Coleman: If a child seems unaware of 9/11, then an open discussion about it before age 12 may be unnecessary. However, because of the anniversary, more kids may hear about it this year. If your younger child brings it up, sees something on TV, or learns about it in school, you should address it.

P&C: How should parents approach the topic?

Dr. Coleman: Always start off by asking what your child has heard. Because the attacks happened here—not in some far off country—9/11 represents a different quality of concern than other events. Under age 12, kids will wonder “Can this happen to us?” and they may not have the kind of abstract thinking ability to sort through the concern. Regardless, once the topic is raised, parents should offer reassurances that they will be safe. Saying “probably safe” or “I hope we will be safe” is not the way to go. Make sure your child knows that he is protected. Kids see things in black and white terms and want to know how events will affect them.

P&C: Should parents address the concept of terrorism?

Dr. Coleman: A child likely won't understand this abstract idea until she is 11 or 12 years old. But, a child as young as 4 can understand the concept of good versus bad. If it comes up, define terrorism in the simplest terms: people who try to hurt others. Keep in mind that your emotions are going to have the biggest impact on your child. If you're anxious about it, your child will pick up on that and may become worried.

P&C: When news of other troubling events like a war or a storm breaks, how can parents tailor their discussion to children of different ages?

Dr. Coleman: For children 3 and under, you wouldn't say much at all unless they witnessed something. For children ages 4 to 7, discuss their fears and try to get to the core of them. Then let your children know that they are safe and loved. Children ages 8 to 12 will be aware of world events such as war, but they may be too young to fully comprehend it. Answer their questions simply, and again, reassure them that they are safe. If your children are 13 or older, you can have a more abstract, realistic discussion about the event.

P&C: Some children may bring up the subject of death. When should parents address that topic?

Dr. Coleman: As soon as your child has some concept of good and bad—usually around age 4 or 5—you can mention death if your child is wondering. She may have been exposed to death in video games or if a pet has died, but won't understand it in a profound way. Use your core beliefs and own comfort level to talk about it—your child will grasp what he can and likely be satisfied with the answer.

P&C: Is it ever OK to lie to your child about what's happening in the world?

Dr. Coleman: Yes, you can lie or distort the truth sometimes. You can't guarantee that you're not going to get into a car accident, but when you'll likely be fine you can modify the truth. By age 11 or 12, though, kids know almost anything is possible and you need to introduce the idea of probability. Explain that it's highly improbable that your child will be in danger. As each day passes and nothing goes wrong, kids assume everything is fine.

P&C: How can parents tell if their child is distraught by news he's heard?

Dr. Coleman: Typical signs of anxiety in children include changes in behavior (your happy-go-lucky kid becomes sullen), suddenly doing worse in school, and having nightmares. As I've mentioned, the best thing parents can do is reassure him that he's safe. To do this, try using the acronym SAFE (see below), which includes steps for figuring out and alleviating your child's concerns. It can be good for kids to learn that life can be challenging, but they also need to know that their parents are there for support.

P&C: How can parents teach their children to help those who are suffering?

Dr. Coleman: When others are in need, you have a great opportunity to teach compassion. Show your children how you help others, whether it's donating money or putting together a care package. Ask your kids how they think children in need feel. Even if your child doesn't completely grasp the idea of helping, it's good for her to witness it. You're putting forth your values and you never know what will sink in.

A Reassuring Word

Use the acronym **SAFE** to help discover and reduce your child's anxieties about the news:

- **Search** for underlying concerns. Point out to your child that you've noticed some changes in him, and inquire what's wrong. You want to search for possibilities, because your child could be anxious about anything.
- **Activity.** Keep your child busy with his usual activities and routines as much as possible, especially if something scary, like an oil spill, is going on around you.
- **Feelings.** Allow your child to experience his feelings by listening to him and empathizing.
- **Ease his mind.** If something is happening across the world, make clear to your child that nothing will happen to him. If something is happening closer to home, you can't give such a clear-cut statement, but you can explain all the steps you're taking to keep your child safe.

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