



[Helping Children with Scary News \(in Spanish\)](#)

Fred Rogers talks about
Tragic Events in the News

[See the video and entire page here.](#)

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."

In times of community or world-wide crisis, it's easy to assume that young children don't know what's going on. But one thing's for sure -- children are very sensitive to how their parents feel. They're keenly aware of the expressions on their parents' faces and the tone of their voices. Children can sense when their parents are really worried, whether they're watching the news or talking about it with others. No matter what children know about a "crisis," it's especially scary for children to realize that their parents are scared.

During his lifetime, Fred Rogers became known for his reassuring way of helping families of young children deal with difficult times, beginning with his response to Robert Kennedy's assassination. Over the years since then, there have, unfortunately, been other tragic events during which parents and educators turned to him for his calming and thoughtful insight. Fred Rogers' wisdom is timeless, and his messages continue to be valuable for children and the people who care for them, as we deal with the events of today's world.

Some Scary, Confusing Images

The way that news is presented on television can be quite confusing for a young child. The same video segment may be shown over and over again through the day, as if each showing was a different event. Someone who has died turns up alive and then dies again and again. Children often become very anxious since they don't understand much about videotape replays, closeups, and camera angles. Any televised danger seems close to home to them because the tragic scenes are taking place on the TV set in their own livingroom. Children can't tell the difference between what's close and what's far away, what's real and what's pretend, or what's new and what's re-run.

The younger the children are, the more likely they are to be interested in scenes of close-up faces, particularly if the people are expressing some strong feelings. When there's tragic news, the images on TV are most often much too graphic and

disturbing for young children.

"Who will take care of me?"

In times of crisis, children want to know, "Who will take care of me?" They're dependent on adults for their survival and security. They're naturally self-centered. They need to hear very clearly that their parents are doing all they can to take care of them and to keep them safe. They also need to hear that people in the government and other grownups they don't even know are working hard to keep them safe, too.

Helping Children Feel More Secure

Play is one of the important ways young children have of dealing with their concerns. Of course, playing about violent news can be scary and sometimes unsafe, so adults need to be nearby to help redirect that kind of play into nurturing themes, such as a hospital for the wounded or a pretend meal for emergency workers.

When children are scared and anxious, they might become more dependent, clingy, and afraid to go to bed at night. Whining, aggressive behavior, or toilet "accidents" may be their way of asking for more comfort from the important adults in their lives. Little by little, as the adults around them become more confident, hopeful and secure, our children probably will, too.

Turn Off the TV

When there's something tragic in the news, many parents get concerned about what and how to tell their children. It's even harder than usual if we're struggling with our own powerful feelings about what has happened. Adults are sometimes surprised that their own reactions to a televised crisis are so strong, but great loss and devastation in the news often reawaken our own earlier losses and fears – even some we think we might have "forgotten"

It's easy to allow ourselves to get drawn into watching televised news of a crisis for hours and hours; however, exposing ourselves to so many tragedies can make us feel hopeless, insecure, and even depressed. We help our children and ourselves if we're able to limit our own television viewing. Our children need us to spend time with them – away from the frightening images on the screen.

Talking and Listening

Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to give our children all the reasons for such things as war, terrorists, abuse, murders, major fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. If they ask questions, our best answer may be to ask them, "What do you think happened?" If the answer is "I don't know," then the simplest reply might be something like, "I'm sad about the news, and I'm worried. But I love you, and I'm here to care for you."

If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may think something is wrong with them when they do feel that way. They certainly don't need to hear all the details of what's making us sad or scared, but if we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them.

Angry feelings are part of being human, especially when we feel powerless. One of the most important messages we can give our children is, "It's okay to be angry, but it's not okay to hurt

ourselves or others." Besides giving children the right to their anger, we can help them find constructive things to do with their feelings. This way, we'll be giving them useful tools that will serve them all their life, and help them to become the worlds' future peacemakers -- the world's future "helpers."

Helpful Hints

- Do your best to keep the television off, or at least limit how much your child sees of any news event.
- Try to keep yourself calm. Your presence can help your child feel more secure.
- Give your child extra comfort and physical affection, like hugs or snuggling up together with a favorite book. Physical comfort goes a long way towards providing inner security. That closeness can nourish you, too.
- Try to keep regular routines as normal as possible. Children and adults count on their familiar pattern of everyday life.
- Plan something that you and your child enjoy doing together, like taking a walk, going on a picnic, having some quiet time, or doing something silly. It can help to know there are simple things in life that can help us feel better, in good times and in bad.
- Even if children don't mention what they've seen or heard in the news, it can help to ask what they think has happened. If parents don't bring up the subject, children can be left with their misinterpretations. You may be really surprised at how much your child has heard from others.
- Focus attention on the helpers, like the police, firemen, doctors, nurses, paramedics, and volunteers. It's reassuring to know there are many caring people who are doing all they can to help others in this world.
- Let your child know if you're making a donation, going to a town meeting, writing a letter or e-mail of support, or taking some other action. It can help children to know that adults take many different active roles and that we don't give in to helplessness in times of worldwide crisis.

This article is excerpted from "The Mister Rogers Parenting Book" the last book Fred Rogers worked on before his death in 2003. In this book he wanted to support parents in their most important work of parenting and to help them better understand their young children. As he wrote in the introduction to the book:

".. if we can bring our children understanding, comfort, and hopefulness when they need this kind of support, then they are more likely to grow into adults who can find these resources within themselves later on."

