



Three tips for helping teenagers deal with frightening world events

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

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

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

I am not saying that these events should not cause us all significant concern, but the question is how much should we expose children - who have only a limited ability to control these events as individuals – to saturation coverage during crises? If part of our job as parents is to protect our teenager's well-being, then there are times when we need to shield them from heavily publicised world events that might cause them fear and worry. This includes us not getting on the bandwagon to criticise those people we hold responsible for these occurrences. As children hear more and more about distressing things, this repetitive 'hearing' or 'viewing' can accumulate stress in their minds. Anxiety builds, in other words.

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 and remember that the media's job is to make things more dramatic so that people watch the news. Be especially aware that images seen on television (or video footage on online media platforms) have a particularly powerful effect on children, even teenagers. I suggest watching a reputable news site together and discussing the event, don't dwell on the gruesome details and go over the facts together. Expect your teenager to be emotional and give them plenty of reassurance. Minimise their exposure without shielding them completely. Trying to shield your teenager completely may pique their interest and will push them to seek news and images on social media sites.

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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 teenager get things in proportion.

Third tip: Help your teenager 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 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 teenager know that where you live has been and will continue to be a generally safe place. That you can and will do normal everyday things and that there are structures in place to work through to make a difference to these unusual events. Explain that the news events they may have seen are not happening everywhere (except for climate change). When it comes to climate change commit to do what you can, (like drive your car less) but don't unnecessarily worry your children about things they can hardly control as individuals. There is research showing that teenagers who set unrealistic goals are less happy. So, better to make deal with yourself and your family that you will give a proportional response and do what you can, within reason.

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 course at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>