

Newspapers have more information and fewer disturbing pictures than television has.



# Is your child ready for the news?

Help her get past the scary headlines to the real story.

By SALLY NOBLE

On a sunny Sunday, just out of church, my daughters and I were chatting as we walked down our suburb's sidewalks. Suddenly my 9-year-old, Alison, hit me with a thunderbolt.

"Mom," she asked, "what exactly is ethnic cleansing?" The minister had used the phrase in his sermon. She had heard it mentioned on television and, in conversation, by concerned-looking grown-ups. "Well," I said, clearing my throat, "sometimes a group of people who all share the same race and religion believe that their country isn't pure because they share the land with people who are different. So those people steal the others' homes and hurt their families to drive them away."

While my answer was honest enough and seemed to satisfy her, I doubt she had any idea how difficult it was to put together. As a parent, I felt I had to walk a thin line, neither insulating her from reality nor weighing her down with concepts and information that would overwhelm her.

When it comes to the world of current events, it's hard for parents to know what to say to their children and what to skip over. We're often pushed

by two contradictory impulses: to give our kids knowledge and to protect them from a harsh and often violent world. However, child-development experts agree nearly unanimously that making current events a part of your

is aware of events outside her personal world," notes Lisa Quiroz, general manager of *Time For Kids*, a weekly classroom publication. Hearing news in bits and pieces, especially news that grown-ups seem to find important

or compelling, only heightens a child's curiosity. Here are some ways to help satisfy that curiosity—and foster a child's genuine interest in her community and in the world—without overloading her.

**Make an interest in current events a family matter.** "All parents are their children's first teachers," says Patricia Houk, educational-services manager at *Newsday*, a newspaper in the New York

family's daily life pays off for kids. The key is to present the news to your child in a way that stresses information and reason instead of sensationalism and fear—and that allows her to feel she can participate in positive change.

Experts agree that a greater understanding of the world empowers kids. They also should realize that the news is more than bombings, wars, and earthquakes. Learning how the system works—whether it's an election or how well the government stops pollution—is also a good reason to follow the news. "When you encourage an interest in the news, you increase a child's ability to explore the world and deal with all kinds of people," says Joyce Martinez, Ed.D., executive director of the Denver Education Network, a nonprofit student-aid organization. "Kids need to know about the world so that they're not afraid of different ethnic groups, foreign places, or institutions such as business or government."

Besides, when really bad things happen in the world, children can't realistically be shielded. Like it or not, they already belong to a mass-media generation.

"The moment a kid starts watching television, she

A scrapbook lets a kid keep track of a complex, ongoing story.





City area. "Going over information in the newspaper together develops communication skills in a family and offers children a new opportunity for sharing feelings and developing empathy." A thoughtful approach to the business of the world depends upon a true two-way conversation. We can let our kids know how we feel about the stories in the news, but we also need to field their questions sensitively and to let them contribute their perspective.

One way to stir up interest in current events is to approach the news as a series of unfolding stories and adventures. Choose a time of day—just after dinner, for example—when everyone can sit down for 15 minutes or so, and follow a single ongoing news story, such as the presidential election or the Bosnian crisis. Newspapers work better than TV for this kind of discussion, because there are fewer disturbing pictures and more information, and while they aren't always objective, papers offer more in-depth coverage of the news and play less to our emotions. Keeping track of a single story—Houk recommends keeping a scrapbook of the one you're following—is usually the most fruitful strategy because it focuses kids, and allows them to see the complexity of the situation.

It's absolutely essential to keep the sessions short and their tone light. Any conversation that starts to sound like a lecture is sure to turn kids off.

**Be clear in your approach.** Remember that what kids need first and foremost is to hear straight answers delivered on their level. They don't require all the details, but they should get a basic grounding in the prevailing issues. Linda Ellerbee, executive producer and host of *Nick News* on the Nickelodeon cable network, recalls, "When we reported on the situation in Bosnia, we simply said that this was a tale of one country made up of three different groups—each of which hates the other. The people hate each other because they are different. This is prejudice. Now, what do you think?"

For ideas on broaching sensitive subjects, browse through news publications your child gets through her school. If the school does not receive any, ask your Parent Teacher Association to recommend age-appropriate ones that you can subscribe to at home.



When violent film clips come on, don't hesitate to change the channel.



Understanding a problem such as poverty can spur kids on to give to others.

**Make information tangible.** "Our magazine tries to do what parents and teachers try to do—give children a framework for understanding the world," says Tamara Rubin, editorial director for *Scholastic News*, a weekly publication distributed in elementary schools. "We want to draw connections between the reader—as a student, as someone's child, as someone's sibling—and events in the larger world."

In the pursuit of relevance, Rubin has become a proponent of what she calls "the five-minute connection"—packaging information in a quick, clear way that relates to children's real feelings about the world and enables them to bring it home to discuss with their parents. "For example, when the first primary elections were held, we looked at them from a kid's point of view and tried to answer obvious questions, such as 'Why are these gray-haired men running for President now when the elec-

tion isn't until November?' That led us into a piece about why choosing a President begins so early," says Rubin.

**Know when to say no to violence.**

Even the most sophisticated adult can be horrified by a graphic clip—of an airplane crash or a murder victim—that appears on the evening news. Letting your child watch body bags being carried away will not increase his understanding of the issues behind crime. It will only disturb him. So when sensationalism hits the screen and makes you feel uncomfortable, you're perfectly justified in shutting off the TV. When your child asks you why you've done it (and he will), explain that you don't want to see a drowning victim being fished out of the river. After all, grown-ups have nightmares too.

**Accentuate the positive.** At the same time, be sure you don't equate a distaste for seeing violence and disaster with pretending that they don't exist. In fact, you can actually use the act of turning off the television as the catalyst for a serious inquiry into current events. When you turn off a program that shows the effects of an African famine, for example, tell your child, "Instead of looking at these pictures and just getting upset, let's go to the library and look at some newspapers. We'll find out why these people don't have food and figure out ways we can help them."

That kind of perspective on the news can have a powerful influence on kids, as I know from my older daughter, Elizabeth. Now 11, she has been a news-hound for some time.

As a member of her school's student council, she spearheaded an effort last Valentine's Day to raise money for AIDS research; almost every kid in the school wore an article of red clothing and donated a dollar. After it was over she said to me, "I know it wasn't a lot, but it felt good to do something. I've been reading about progress in AIDS research and felt it was important to bring it up at school."

Feeling that we can contribute to solving the world's problems is the essence of responsible citizenship—and good news for children everywhere. □

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