

Judicious use of media can help children navigate difficult times

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Nusheen Ameenuddin, M.D., M.P.H., M.P.A., FAAP

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Editor's note: For the latest news about the COVID-19 pandemic, visit

<https://www.aapublications.org/news/2020/01/28/coronavirus>.

Spending the last few months socially distanced but virtually connected due to the COVID-19 pandemic opened up multiple opportunities for innovative media use. Broadband access supported new ways to learn, work and socialize when in-person interactions were limited. Pediatricians and parents struggled to ensure that recreational screen time did not become unhealthy.

But what happens when a pandemic intersects with other chronic crises that affect children's well-being?

Underlying issues do not disappear in a crisis, but tragedy may bring them to a head and into a child's virtual life, especially if they are online nearly 24/7 for school, social connection and other reasons.

While traditional wisdom tried to shield young eyes from bad news, pediatricians must understand that what some children experience only virtually is a daily reality for other children. With a U.S. pediatric population of approximately 50% children of color and 25% in an immigrant family, many children do not have the option to turn off bad news to avoid dealing with the effects of violence, racism, natural disasters, parental deportation or other traumatic events.

Handling tragic news by turning off the TV and reassuring children that everything will be OK does not match the reality of so many children. However, the interconnectedness that this global community shares also provides opportunities to use media to help them navigate a sometimes scary world.

Here are a few tips that pediatricians can share with families in their practice:

- Books, the original media, require no internet connection and possibly no electricity if using natural light. There are wonderful children's books on race relations and contemporary issues that provide historical context to children in a relatable, age-appropriate manner. Resources include <https://thebrownbookshelf.com/> and <https://www.embracerace.org/resources/26-childrens-books-to-support-conversations-on-race-racism-resistance>.
- Empower children by sharing media of people responding to problems with positive action, either by marching for justice and safety for all, speaking up to help others or doing work to help affected communities (<https://bit.ly/3dTNAEJ>). Mr. Rogers' advice to look for the helpers can reassure children that good can come out of bad news.
- If children are having difficulty processing what is happening, which can manifest as poor sleep, acting out or withdrawal, give them space to express and work through their feelings. Let them know that it is OK and normal to be scared, sad, worried or angry. Sharing stories of people who have taken personal losses but want to see justice served (<https://n.pr/2BOnrc7> and <https://nyti.ms/3hgRsSj>) can help children understand that even when individuals are hurting, they have the power to act in service of the greater good.
- Co-viewing media can help parents curate content and guide important discussion during and after the fact. Parents also can be instrumental in encouraging media literacy or critical consumption of media, which is a necessary skill for youths in the age of misinformation and disinformation.
- There are excellent examples of child-friendly shows that explore difficult issues (<https://cnn.it/2AVtjQD>). Complicated situations do not require avoidance. Helping children process complex issues and feelings means setting them up for success as adults.
- Media limits still matter. The AAP recommends keeping screens out of bedrooms and ensuring that screen time does not negatively affect sleep, mood, physical activities or school work (online schooling and school work done on a screen does not count as screen time).

Media can be a powerful tool to help children build empathy, awareness and resilience. Discussing current events and working through difficult feelings that come from challenging situations can be a way to empower children and show them how they can work to be part of the solution. Parents know their children best and can tailor this advice to each child's temperament and situation.

Dr. Ameenuddin is chair of the AAP Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee.

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