



HELPING KIDS AND TEENS MANAGE DIFFICULT IMAGES AND EMOTIONS

Just like most of us, children and teens are also experiencing a prolonged grief and trauma event. 2020 asked our children to adjust to new experiences with an ever changing narrative of what was safe and what wasn't. For many, this resulted in anxiety, depression, sadness, isolation, and fear. While they may not understand the details—and we may think we are shielding them from the news—children, even young children, sense when caregivers are concerned, scared, and worried. Teens not only sense the worry in adults, they have access to the news, hear about events through social media, and can create their own narrative of events. How do you, as a caregiver witnessing and experiencing this yourself, support your child or teen?

ASK – Ask them what they know, what they have heard, what they've seen, and what they think. Ask how this makes them feel. And listen; let them talk and share before you try to correct or clarify. News, information, and conversations will continue for the days and weeks to come so plan to check in with your children and teens regularly to inquire about what they have heard and know.

CLARIFY – In a developmentally appropriate way explain what is happening. For young children this may include limited details and simple explanations such as, "there were some grown ups who went where they weren't allowed and made some bad choices." If your child asks what kind of bad choices, again, make the explanation simple such as, "they broke things" or "they went somewhere they weren't allowed to go." Answer their questions with simple factual information.

For teens, clarifying may include providing more information, watching the news together, and engaging in a dialog about the events. Remember that you don't have to have all of the answers and you can tell them that you don't know. For teens it may be helpful to monitor more closely their technology and social media to temper the amount of difficult images they are viewing and ensure they are hearing accurate information.

COMMUNICATE SAFETY – Follow up clarifying statements with communicating safety. Brainstorm together all of the ways that kids and teens work to keep themselves safe (from big ways to small), then list some examples: asking before going somewhere outside of the house/apartment, knowing who they can ask for help when they feel scared, etc. This helps give kids and teens a sense of agency and control. Then provide examples of how the grown-ups in their lives keep them safe.

VALIDATE – What kids and teens are feeling makes sense; tell them it makes sense. Share with them what you're feeling. Help them connect how their body feels (tight stomach, restless legs, heavy shoulders, etc.) to their emotions. Offer compassion and connection.

MOVE – Help kids and teens move any anxious energy out of their bodies. Dance, stretch, do yoga, go for a walk, shake it out, or do jumping jacks. Grown-ups, your body also needs this! Be sure to move alongside your children and find other ways to calm your own nervous system, whether through music, hot tea, or a comforting scent.

[Wendt Center for Loss and Healing](#) is the Greater Washington region's premier resource for restoring hope and healthy functioning to adults, teens, and children who are coping with grief, loss, and trauma. Wendt Center Training Institute offers customized, trauma-informed [workshops](#) and [certifications](#) that equip mental health and allied professionals with skills to address grief, loss, and trauma in the communities in which they work and live.