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The Center for Youth & Family Solutions Offers Guidance for Parents on Talking to Kids About Distressing News

Peoria, IL — With ongoing national and global events dominating headlines, many children and teens are being exposed to frightening or confusing information—often before caregivers even know what they’ve seen. The Center for Youth & Family Solutions (CYFS), a leading provider of behavioral health services across central Illinois, is offering guidance to help parents and caregivers navigate these challenging conversations with confidence.

“Kids take their emotional cues from the adults around them,” said Director of Therapeutic Services Stephanie Barisch. “When difficult news breaks, what children need most is a steady, honest, and compassionate adult who can help them make sense of what they’re hearing. You don’t need the perfect words—just presence, connection, and appropriate truth.”

CYFS clinicians recommend the following evidence-informed strategies for caregivers:

1. Start With Yourself

Children are highly sensitive to caregivers’ emotional states. Before talking, take a moment to breathe, ground yourself, and get into a calm space. “Regulated adults help create regulated kids,” CYFS experts emphasize.

2. Listen First

Begin with open questions such as “*What have you heard?*” or “*What questions do you have?*” This helps adults correct misinformation and tailor the conversation to a child’s developmental level without overwhelming them.

3. Be Brief, Honest, and Age-Appropriate

Share accurate basics without graphic detail. It’s okay to say, “*I don’t know, but we can find out together.*” With so much online misinformation, caregivers should point children toward reliable, credible sources.



4. Name and Normalize Feelings

Children may feel sad, worried, confused, or angry— and all of those feelings are normal. Younger children may show stress through clinginess or regression, while older youth may have sleep disruptions, irritability, or withdrawal.

Caregivers can share their own feelings in calm, age-appropriate ways to model healthy emotional expression.

5. Reassure Safety and Maintain Routines

Highlight the ways families, schools, and communities keep children safe.

Predictable routines—bedtime, meals, schoolwork—help stabilize the nervous system and reinforce a sense of security after frightening news.

6. Monitor Media Exposure

Research consistently shows that repeated viewing of distressing images increases anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms—even for youth far from the event.

CYFS recommends:

- Turning off autoplay and push alerts
- Avoiding graphic content before bedtime
- Creating “tech-free recovery breaks”
- Co-viewing content with older youth and discussing it together

7. Emphasize Agency and “Helpers”

Small acts of kindness—making cards, donating, helping others—build resilience and reduce helplessness. Caregivers can encourage kids to “look for the helpers,” a well-known Mr. Rogers reminder that remains powerfully grounding.

8. Tailor the Conversation by Developmental Stage

- Ages 0–5: Keep explanations extremely simple; offer comfort; avoid news exposure.
- Ages 6–12: Correct rumors, clarify facts, and discuss safety routines.



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- Teens: Discuss how social media algorithms amplify distressing content and collaborate on boundaries and trustworthy news sources.

9. Know When to Seek Additional Support

If intense worry, sleep disruption, intrusive thoughts, or avoidance of regular activities continues beyond 2–4 weeks, additional support may be needed.

“Effective, evidence-based treatment exists—and it works,” CYFS clinicians note. “Families never have to navigate this alone.”

Sample Phrases Caregivers Can Use Tonight

- Preschool: *“A scary thing happened far away. You are safe here with me. Let’s take some balloon breaths together.”*
- School-Age: *“You may hear different stories. What did you hear today? Let’s sort out what’s true.”*
- Teens: *“You’ve probably seen a lot in your feed. How is it affecting you? Want to talk about reliable sources and boundaries together?”*

About The Center for Youth & Family Solutions

The Center for Youth & Family Solutions is a nonprofit behavioral health and child welfare agency serving children, youth, and families throughout central Illinois and eastern Iowa. CYFS provides trauma-responsive counseling, foster care services, youth programming, and family support with the mission of helping individuals build safe, healthy, and resilient lives.

Media Contact

Celeste Matheson
Director of Marketing & Development
The Center for Youth & Family Solutions
(309) 634-1611 cmatheson@cyfsolutions.org

www.cyfsolutions.org

