

HOW TO EXPLAIN THE NEWS TO YOUR CHILDREN

In recent months, we, as a nation and global community, have had to face many challenges. The state of our nation and our world weighs heavy on all of us. Since November, we have observed interactions between children playing with one another and children interacting with teachers indicating they may be struggling with processing information about world events they have either witnessed on television or through well-intended conversations with parents about troubles in the world today. Unfortunately, young children cannot process this information in the way adults can. These well-intentioned exposures to world events has a troubling effect on the very young. It doesn't better prepare them to live in our modern world. It doesn't foster compassion and understanding. It makes them feel unsafe and insecure.

From the Waldorf School of Philadelphia -

The first Waldorf School was established in 1919 in the wake of World War I. The impulse was to pioneer an education to help create a just and peaceful society. To that end, Rudolf Steiner crafted a curriculum to educate the whole child – head, heart, hands.

*Receive children in reverence, educate them in love, and let them go forth in freedom
– Rudolf Steiner*

In spite of recent days, we must continue to believe that there is good in the world, and we must continue to educate our children to have reverence, respect and love for all living things.

But how do we speak to our children about terrible news events? In 2011, The Waldorf School of Philadelphia published an article written by Shannon Stevens. Shannon wrote the article as she was trying to process news of the death of Osama Bin Laden. Her advice for parents of young children is applicable today, especially as we struggle ourselves to come to terms with the never-ending war, the unsettling political climate and great divide within our nation, and the tragic refugee crisis our world is facing.

*We often equate parenting with the word “worry.” That is part of our job as parents,
but we should not define childhood by it.*

“Of all the things one can simplify – toys, food, schedules – news and media is by far the hardest. In his book, [Simplicity Parenting](#), Kim John Payne recommends reducing the amount of screen time in the home. On the best of days this can be a challenge, but can seem downright impossible on a day when there is a big news story. We find ourselves glued to the television about the news of Osama Bin Laden's death. “It is history,” “It is healing,” we justify, but this is not so for our children. For how does one explain to a young child that people are relieved because someone was killed? Even if that someone hurt many others?

For the young child it is confusing ... in one way. And yet, we do tell them fairy tales where bad things happen. And that is the answer.

Fairy tales are archetypal stories – ancient – that convey what needs to be conveyed in the biggest sense without overwhelming the senses of the child.

Whereas the news is filled with a lot of people talking quickly, plus pictures, maps, graphs, explanations, questions, and theories. Lots of excitement. For our adult minds, we can process it. But for children it is simply too much.

The world was stunned by the events of 9/11. I remember dropping my children off in kindergarten and the 2nd grade that morning and heading home with my youngest. Then I heard about the twin towers. No one knew what would happen next – could Philadelphia be a target? The Waldorf School dismissed the kids early, sending a letter to remind us to protect our children from the news. This was a hard task for parents and for the teachers who taught again the next day.

I, like many others, did have my TV on a lot that first day. At one point, my 3-year-old son came into the room. A picture of Osama Bin Laden was on the screen. He looked and pointed, saying, “Santa Claus.” I scooped him up and we went in the other room. I did not contradict him. I did not tell him that the bearded man was not the patron saint of children but rather a terrorist mastermind. He did not need to know that. It would have confused him terribly.

I remember all this today as the news of Bin Laden’s death sinks in. My youngest is now 12, and he actually was one of the first to know (he had covertly worn earphones to bed, feigned sleep, and was listening to the Phil’s game when the report was made.). So, how does one deal with this news in regard to our children, particularly our young ones, those below the age of 9?

The truth is that the world is a safe and bountiful place filled with loving people.

Young children do not need to know about Homeland Security. For them, it need only mean a roof over their head, food on the table, and adults who love them deeply.

Yes, that is security. Not whether Osama Bin Laden is dead. So, I suggest a fairytale. The one that popped into my head this morning was “*The Three Billy Goats Gruff.*” In it there is a bridge that cannot be crossed because a mean troll lives underneath and will eat all who try. Three goats need to cross to get to the fresh grass on the other side. The youngest goes and when confronted by the troll, says the troll should wait for the next goat because he is bigger and will make a better meal. The troll agrees and the young goat passes. The middle-size goat comes to the bridge, is confronted by the troll and has a similar conversation. The biggest goat, Big Billy Goat Gruff, now comes along. His large hoofs bang loudly on the bridge. The troll shouts and threatens from below. Big Billy Goat Gruff dares him to come up. The troll does so, but is fiercely killed. The three goats, and others, can now safely cross the stream. Of course when telling such a story to your child today, you do not need to include that Billy

Goat Gruff was a Navy SEAL, trained in special ops and flying a Blackhawk helicopter! But you can get the idea: the bully is not going to win, the strong will protect the young, and life is safe and good.

So, when listening to the news, and whatever may come about in the following days, please remember the children.

Let us as adults filter out what comes to them. Each family will do this in their own way depending upon many circumstances. But if we all try to be conscious, to remember that adults and children are different, I know it will help.”

More from Kim John Payne’s book – Simplicity Parenting....

“Young children do not view violence in the same way adults do: until the age of six or seven, children are developmentally and psychologically unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy.”

We’ve seen issues evolve and resolve; we see how history reshapes the social and political landscape. As adults, we have ways of prioritizing our concerns, of seeing “the times we live in” in various lights and through various contexts.

Young children do not have the mental faculties to process information that way, especially information about issues and things far beyond their scope of reference. Too much information does not “prepare” a child for a complicated world; it paralyzes them...children need to know they have a place in a good world and a future of promise.

This doesn’t mean we should fit our children with rose-colored glasses. I am not saying we should avoid any discussion of the challenges of our time. Nor does it mean that children can’t recover, in strength and resiliency, from hardships they experience in their early years. But our adult anxieties and concerns should not be the atmosphere, a haze of too much information, that they breathe. Children need to know that theirs is a good world. They need to feel that, sheltered by those they love, they are where they should be. They have a place, in a time and a world of hope and promise.

Kids as young as kindergarten age are hearing, over juice and crackers, about shrinking rainforests and oil reserves. In their concern and remarkable ability to drink in information, many very young kids hold a precocious awareness of huge issues. But is that helpful to them or to the environment? This kind of information needs to be balanced with doing. A Child is preparing for world issues in their own ways, in vigorous interaction with their sensory environment, their childhood world. Through play, with its

engineering and problem solving, they are gathering the mental flexibility they will need to make a difference in the larger world.

I am reminded of the road sign: CAUTION: BRIDGE FREEZES BEFORE ROAD. The bridge is more vulnerable to frost because it lacks a foundation. The earth below the road provides grounding and warmth. In the same way, too much information can freeze a child. Not only do they lack context for the information, they lack the foundation that childhood slowly provides: the foundation of years of relatively safe observation, interaction, and exploration.

My friend Kathy mentioned her nine-year-old son, Sam, was having some trouble at school. Casually she described a phone call from Sam's teacher, but her voice betrayed more emotion than her words. Evidently, Sam was questioning his teacher's authority, making sarcastic comments out loud or under his breath, and rolling his eyes in response to things that she said. "That's just not Sam." Kathy said. Maybe not, I thought, at least not entirely, not yet. But it sounded very much like Eddie, Sam's father.

A financial analyst by trade, Eddie's passion is politics. He is one of the brightest, funniest men I know. But his wit is biting and acerbic, and he spares no verbal punches for some of the politicians in office. The target of Eddie's most caustic and cynical comments was an American President whose term began the twenty-first century and extended for most of Sam's life. It seemed to me quite understandable that Sam was having trouble respecting an authority figure in his own life, after years of hearing his dad call the President a variety of names (with idiot at the top of the list). Sam didn't hear the reasoning or politics behind his dad's opinions, but he did hear the derision. He didn't understand party politics or campaign promises, but he picked right up on his dad's cynicism and disrespect. Sam's nine-year-old versions of the same things – sarcasm and disrespect – were not serving him well in the fourth grade, not in the least.

One aspect of talking less is realizing that what children mainly hear, in your wash of words, is the current of emotion running through them. And what they understand, more than the details, or any words we could possibly use, are our actions. When we speak to others with respect – whether it's our mother, bus driver, President, or man at the check-out stand, no explanations or distinctions are necessary.

...We project a general sense of optimism to children when we talk less (with them) about things they may not understand and definitely have no power to affect. The details are often lost on them, but the way we move in the world determines their view. We may not be crazy about this or that politician, or the politics in our workplace, but as adults we know things change. We know we have the recourse of our actions and our vote.

When we talk less, we convey a sense of confidence and competence in the world, a world where people strive to be just. There's less need to explain, expound, justify, clarify, or qualify – and our meaning is clearer – when we pay more attention (as children do) to the tone of our words and our actions...such security is priceless. It is a solid foundation. It helps the child through those dark nights when you can't see clearly. It points ahead to the promise of a better day.

- Kim John Payne