

## Distressing news events: Helping children to cope



### Poll report

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Poll 26, August 2022



### Report highlights

- Almost one third (29%) of children have been upset or distressed about news in the media in the past three months.
- Primary school aged children are most commonly affected by distressing news in the media.
- Half of all children upset by news coverage experienced this multiple times in the past three months.
- Only half of parents (53%) are confident talking about distressing news with their children.

**Almost one in three** children have been distressed by news coverage in the last three months



## How common it is for children to be distressed by something they see or hear in the media?

Parents reported 29% of children aged between three and 17 years had been upset, worried or distressed about something they saw or heard in the news in the preceding three months, with 14% experiencing this multiple times. Distress varied with age, with primary school aged children most commonly reported to be affected (35%), followed by teenagers (29%) and pre-schoolers (17%) (see *Figure 1*). Children who were rated by their parents as having poor or fair mental health ( $n=316$ ) were more likely to be distressed by news in the media (42%) than those rated as having good, very good or excellent mental health (28%). There was no meaningful difference in the proportion who were distressed by news when considering sex of child, language spoken at home, regional versus metropolitan residence or socio-economic status of the family.

## How confident are parents talking about worrying or distressing news with their children?

Half of parents (53%) reported they were confident discussing worrying or distressing news with their children, with 44% somewhat confident and just 3% not at all confident. Parents whose eldest child is a teenager were more likely to be confident discussing distressing news with their children (58%) than parents whose eldest child is primary school aged (54%) or pre-school aged (41%) (see *Figure 2* on following page). Parents that speak English at home were more likely to be confident

(57%) than those speaking a language other than English at home (40%). Parents who reported being likely to have a significant mental health concern<sup>1</sup> were less likely to be confident discussing distressing news with their child (34%) than those without likely mental health concerns (56%). There was no meaningful difference in the confidence of parents when considering household income, parent level of education, parent sex or regional versus metropolitan residence.

## Implications

This study highlights how common it is for Australian children to be upset by the news coverage they see or hear, particularly primary school aged children, with one in three being distressed by news content in the past three months. Children frequently see or hear news coverage, with younger children often exposed when adults watch TV or listen to the radio, and older children often directly viewing media online. This means that children can be exposed to media coverage of distressing news, such as natural disasters, illness and deaths during pandemics such as COVID-19, wars, terrorism, accidents and violent crime. Different children cope in different ways and exposure to traumatic news can lead children to feel confused, distressed or anxious and in rarer cases trigger Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

We know that talking about distressing news with a parent or caregiver is an important way to help children cope. With only half of Australian parents confident to talk about distressing news with their child, there is a need to educate and support parents in how to have these conversations with their children. This study suggests some parents may be less equipped than

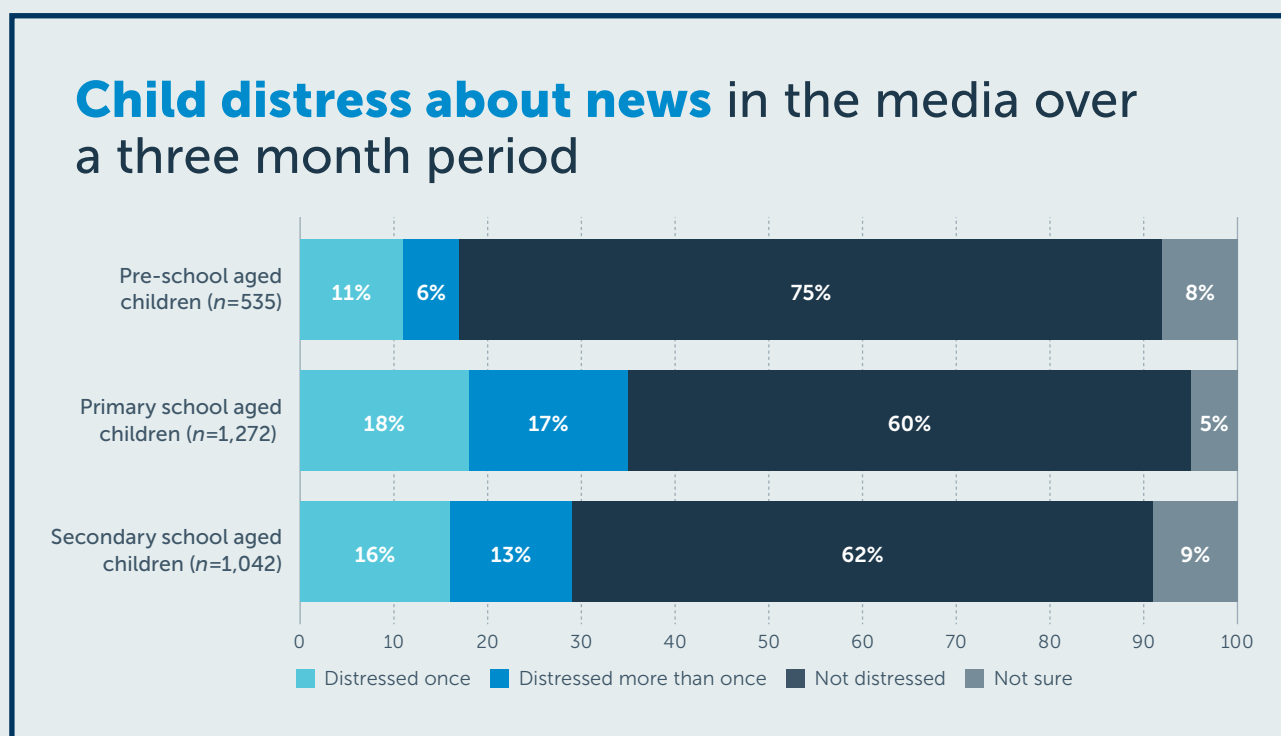


Figure 1.

## Parent confidence discussing distressing news with children by age of eldest child

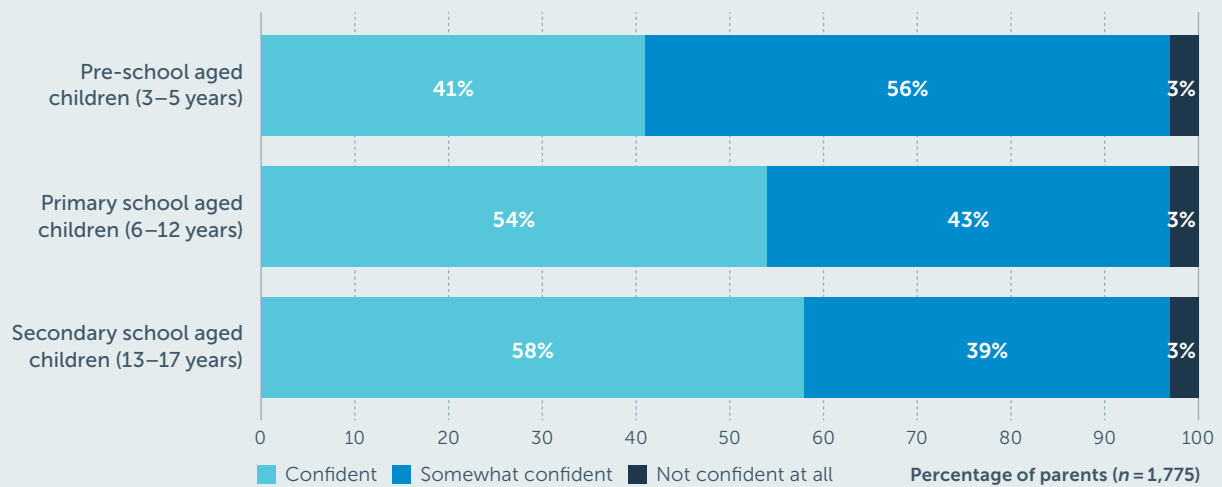


Figure 2.

others, with parents of culturally diverse backgrounds and those with their own mental health challenges less likely to be confident helping their child to cope with distressing news coverage. Targeted and tailored education is needed to assist parents in supporting their children to understand and cope with distressing news.

While we cannot always stop children from being exposed to distressing news, it can be helpful to consider ways to limit media exposure for children. Adults can be mindful of TV and radio consumed when around children and consider limit setting and content filters on devices and online sources. Co-viewing with children and young people is an effective way to ensure a parent or caregiver is there to discuss difficult content and limit media that is likely to be distressing or inappropriate. Journalists, the media and government also have a key role to play in considering what and how news is reported, and ensuring classifications are in place to help limit our children’s exposure to traumatic news.

Only half of parents are **confident** talking about distressing news with their children



## Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

In an online survey conducted in April 2022, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their views and experiences in relation to their child's exposure to distressing news in the media over the preceding three months.

The survey was administered from April 14 to April 27, 2022, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1,775). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. A nationally representative sample of 1,775 parents yielded data on a total of 2,849 children aged between three and 17 years. There were 1,042 secondary school aged children between 13 and 17 years, 1,272 primary school aged children between six and 12 years, and 535 pre-school aged children aged three to six years. The data were subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 58%.

## References



1. Australian Bureau of Statistics Cat no. 4817.0.55.001 – Information Paper: Use of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale in ABS Health Surveys, Australia, 2007–08, latest issue 04.04.2012.

## Suggested citation



The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2022).  
*Distressing news events: Helping children to cope* Poll Number 26.  
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