

STRATEGIES FOR **PARENTS & TEENS**

# CURRENT EVENTS

Parents of Middle & High Schoolers



MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



FACING  
HISTORY &  
OURSELVES

In partnership with



## INTRODUCTION

Between traditional media and ever-growing online sources, the constant stream of news and information has never been more accessible for adults and children alike. Though safeguards can be implemented to shield young people from especially troubling content, it is inevitable that they will come across disturbing or upsetting news and other content that they may need support to process and understand.

To help parents navigate conversations around current events, Facing History &

Ourselves and Harvard University's Making Caring Common Project have partnered with The Choose Kindness Project to create this resource. In this guide, parents of middle and high school students will find strategies for reflection, discussion, and more to engage with their children and help them process current events.

For more ideas visit [Making Caring Common](#), [Facing History & Ourselves](#), and [The Choose Kindness Project](#).





# 1 | START WITH YOURSELF

## Overview

*Your identity, opinions, and experiences are all present and essential in conversations about current events with your teen.*

It's important to take time to **reflect on how your lived experience, values, political positions, and beliefs impact your reactions to news topics** and the way you address them with your teen.

Your identity or background can elicit a particular emotional connection or useful insight into an event and your identity, and your values and beliefs can also give rise to biases of various kinds. If an emotionally challenging or violent event has a strong impact on you because of your identity, make sure to consider what you need to take care of yourself as well as your teen.

There may also be times when events fall outside of your lived experience. Being aware of your connection to or distance from an event is an important first step to take before you discuss it with your teen. **Leave space for your teen to explore their own identity in the context of the news you are discussing.**

## HARNESSING EMPATHY & GROWING YOUR CIRCLE OF CONCERN

*It is likely that certain stories in the media will elicit different reactions based on how they impact you and your family directly.*

Consider your identity and harness **empathy** to expand the care you have for people within your group to those outside of your current **circle of concern**. Reflect on the relationship you had with the news as a kid and how you cope with the news today to help guide the choices you make in your conversations with your teen today.

Sometimes having empathy for people impacted by a specific event in the news comes to us easily. But when that empathy is not as easily accessible, perhaps because those impacted by an event are much different from us, we need to work on growing our empathy. If you recognize an event falls far outside of your lived experience, take some time to identify how to grow your circle of concern for those involved. Do research or outreach to learn about the situation and invite your teen to join you. **When you show empathy for people who are different from you, you are modeling for your teen a vital form of caring for others.**



### **Empathy:**

Understanding others, experiencing what they feel and valuing them as people.

### **Circle of concern:**

The group of people we think about, care about, and interact with in ways that are kind and thoughtful.



## START WITH **YOURSELF**

### **REFLECT** *on your identity and current and past experiences with the news.*

- 1.** What factors make up your identity (for example, race, religion, nationality, political beliefs) and how do these factors influence how you respond to different current events?
- 2.** How can you bring empathy to those impacted by an event and expand your circle of concern?
- 3.** What was the first time you felt scared by the news? How old were you, how did you hear about it, and how did you cope with those feelings?
- 4.** What is a misconception or confusion you had about a specific news headline or event as a teen?
- 5.** How do you cope with difficult news today?



---

## 2 | ESTABLISH CURRENT EVENTS ROUTINES

### Overview

*Find intentional moments to discuss current events with your teen. Create a current events routine that will give you and your teen the opportunity to discuss and reflect together.*

### Make a routine

Identify a time/place that works for you and your teen on a regular basis. Consider talking at dinner, at breakfast, in the car, on a walk, or during family time. As you discuss the news together, **take the time to understand your teen's questions and concerns** so that difficult topics are given their necessary attention. Consider what setting might make the conversations most meaningful.

**Create boundaries around the constant stream of news** and establish moments that are free of news. When the news is distressing, discuss, answer questions, and then find time to decompress in ways that are not related to the topic. If your teen is really moved by an event, you can also look for ways to take action. This can help instill hope and a sense of agency when news feels overwhelming or particularly distressing.



## ELEMENTS OF CONVERSATION

There are many ways you can structure a conversation with your teen (see p. 9, Recommended Engagement Strategies) but **keep in mind these conversation elements** in any conversation format:



- Ask a question or two to understand what your teen already knows, but try not to ask too many questions as this might overwhelm your teen.
- Validate their feelings and emotions and let them know it's safe to ask you questions. Help them process what is going on by encouraging them to tell their own version of the story.
- Model what to do when you don't know the answer – if your teen asks you something and you don't know the answer, be honest and try to find the answer together.
- Reassure your teen that you are always available for more conversations and support if they continue to feel upset. Always listen to their responses openly and with curiosity.

### REFLECT

*Consider the following questions when preparing to discuss the news with your teen:*

1. When does a conversation about current events fit most easily into your day? Can you pair it with a time you already spend together? Ex: Mealtime, on the way to school, on a walk, during family time?
2. What type of current events will tap into your teen's interests?
3. How will you offer support to your teen around a difficult topic?
4. What has already occurred in your and your teen's day before your conversation? Will you both have the bandwidth to focus on the topic at this time? Are there connections you can make to earlier or upcoming events in your and your teens life?
5. If something will be emotional for you, how can you ensure the setting and the amount of time you have will allow you



to share those feelings and use coping mechanisms that are helpful to you and your teen?

6. If you think something will be emotionally activating for your teen, how can you ensure you will have the time to answer their questions and hear their concerns?
7. How can you make sure to be open and constructive when your teen is upset? *Many parents/caregivers find it difficult to bear when their teens are upset or are experiencing difficult emotions. If you feel like you can't be constructive or will struggle dealing with your teens' feelings, think about who else might talk to your teen.*





### 3 | USE RELIABLE NEWS SOURCES

#### Overview

*Finding a reliable news source is a skill you can help your teen learn.*

Ask your teen about where they get their news and introduce them to trustworthy news sources. Let them know that some media can be biased and misleading and help them develop the **media literacy** skills necessary to critically engage with current events. Ad Fontes Media's **Interactive Media Bias Chart 5.0** can help you select a variety of reliable and balanced news sources. Look at the chart with your teen and discuss what makes some sources more reliable than others. Then, view the news/ read an article together and work together to try to tease out what the facts are, what the opinions are, and what the analysis/context is. Ask what messages are missing, who are you not hearing from, and who do you want to hear from. **Help your teen judge the reliability of information they encounter** in the news or on social media, assess how their own identity and perspectives influence their responses based on what and who they have empathy for, and provide supportive guidance about how they absorb and share news through social media. What does this event mean to you? To your teen? To others? Model concern for issues that directly affect you as well as issues that affect others. Express and share empathy.



**Media literacy:** The ability to evaluate the tone, perspectives, and sources in a news piece.

## USE **RELIABLE** NEWS SOURCES

1. Where do you get your information/news from? What biases might be present in these sources?
2. Where does your teen get their information/news from? What biases might be present in these sources?
3. What are some ways that your teen could improve their media literacy? How can you help facilitate that?
4. What stories, messages, or people are you and your teen not hearing about in the news that deserve more attention?

### Additional resources

#### PARENTS:

- How to talk to teens about difficult news:  
– [apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/talking-children](https://apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/talking-children)

#### TEENS:

- New York Times for Teens/Classrooms website:  
– [nytimes.com/section/learning](https://nytimes.com/section/learning)
- Teen Kids News:  
– [teenkidsnews.com](https://teenkidsnews.com)
- News Podcasts:  
– [news.wfsu.org/show/411-teen-on-88-9-wfsu-fm](https://news.wfsu.org/show/411-teen-on-88-9-wfsu-fm)  
– [vox.com/today-explained-podcast](https://vox.com/today-explained-podcast)



## 4 | RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### Overview

*Find intentional moments to discuss current events with your teen. Create a current events routine that will give you and your teen the opportunity to discuss and reflect together.*

When you want to:	Try this:
<b>Find Where to Start</b> Help launch conversations about complex events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• S-I-T</li><li>• Color Symbol Image</li></ul>
<b>Build Mutual Trust and Understanding</b> Create space to share experiences and ideas and build mutual understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Head, Heart, Conscience</li><li>• Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn</li></ul>
<b>Cope with Distressing News</b> Manage and process challenging topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Toolbox for Care</li></ul>



## RECOMMENDED **ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

### When you want to:

#### **Find Where to Start**

Help launch conversations about complex events

### Try this:

- S-I-T
- Color Symbol Image

## SIT (Surprising - Interesting - Troubling)

Use this strategy as a starting point for conversations about events as they are happening in real time. After learning about an event, take turns identifying the following:

- One **S**urprising fact or idea
- One **I**nteresting fact or idea
- One **T**roubling fact or idea

Use your teens' responses to gauge how your teen is feeling about the news or event and steer the conversation from there.



## Color Symbol Image

When you aren't sure how to initiate a conversation about a topic, begin with this reflection activity to help you and your teen identify how you are feeling through non-verbal communication. These non-verbal prompts may feel more approachable and function as a starting point to dive deeper into conversations about feelings that can be hard to articulate through words. Choose a topic or specific article and respond to it with the following prompts:

- Choose a **color** that you think best represents your feelings in reaction to the topic.
- Choose a **symbol** that you think best represents your feelings in reaction to the topic.
- Choose an **image** that you think best represents your feelings in reaction to the topic.

## RECOMMENDED **ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

### When you want to:

#### **Build Mutual Trust and Understanding**

Create space to share experiences and ideas and build mutual understanding

### Try this:

- Head, Heart, Conscience
- Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn

## Head, Heart, Conscience

Build mutual respect and connection during conversations about difficult news. Share about yourself and give your teen space to share about themselves. Use the following prompts as a guide:

#### **Head:**

- What information do you know about this event?
- What additional information would you like to have to help you understand the event better?

#### **Heart:**

- What emotions does this event raise for you?
- Are there particular moments, images, or stories that stand out to you? If so, why?

#### **Conscience:**

- What questions about fairness, equity, or justice does this event raise for you?
- How were people impacted by this event? Are there people who should be held accountable? If so, how?

## Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn

To help teens know their thoughts and opinions matter in conversations with authority figures, let them know you are eager to learn from and with them and that their thoughts, opinions, and questions are an important part of your learning process. You may want to give each other time to gather thoughts before diving into a conversation about a difficult event. You might take five to ten minutes to write some notes down about the topic you are discussing, how you are feeling, and what you are wondering. Then, begin your conversation by both sharing what came up during that time of reflection.



## RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### When you want to:

#### **Cope with Distressing News**

Manage and process challenging topics

### Try this:

- Toolbox for Care

## Toolbox for care

Home is meant to be a safe space, and discussing difficult topics and experiencing challenging events can sometimes get in the way. Together with your teen, come up with “tools” you each need to support yourselves and each other when the news feels particularly upsetting and overwhelming. The idea with this strategy is to select physical objects or “tools” that represent the skills, attitudes, and actions that young people can use to take care of themselves or others during difficult times. Toolboxes can take a variety of forms, such as an actual box, a hollowed-

out old book, or a soft-sided sewn object. The “tools” within can be symbolic objects, collages, images, poems, or favorite quotations. For example, you can include eyeglasses to help them “focus more clearly.”

These “tools” fall into two categories: The first represents strategies to cope with intense emotions and the second represents strategies to alleviate feelings of helplessness. Revisit your toolbox when discussing and processing difficult news.

### Use the following question prompts to consider what to put in your toolboxes:

#### **Managing intense emotions:**

- What will I have in my toolbox that will help me take care of myself or reach out for help if I need it? (e.g. call a friend or journal)
- What will I have in my toolbox that will help me build connections with other people?

#### **Alleviating helplessness:**

- What will I have in my toolbox that will help me do “small acts” of goodness on a daily basis?
- What will I have in my toolbox that will help me turn those small acts into something bigger and more impactful?
- What will I have in my toolbox that will help me choose kindness over indifference, especially during difficult times?