SOCIAL STUDIES SPOTLIGHT
HELPING STUDENTS COPE
WITH UNSETTLING NEWS EVENTS

Unsettling news events can be short, one-time occurrences, or ongoing and long-lasting ones. They can be natural events such as a hurricane or pandemic—or acts of human violence such as a terrorist attack, school shooting, or police brutality. As victims suffer from so much loss, even for people watching the news, a sense of helplessness and frustration can take hold. For parents and school professionals who talk to kids about traumatic events, the strategies below can help empower students with knowledge while restoring a sense of calm.

Start with Facts
Media coverage can provide useful information and build empathy for communities affected by disaster. Parents and teachers should also provide accurate information. Share facts as plainly as possible, but avoid graphic details and repeated exposure.

Listen and Validate
As you wade into difficult topics, it is important not to retraumatize students. Discussions should encourage an exploration of feelings. Adults should start by listening to and validating children's experiences.

Have Age-Appropriate Discussions
Elementary students might think that repeated coverage of the same event is actually multiple events. They might think that the event occurred close by. Emphasize for young kids the distance and scope of the event. Clarify any misconceptions, but avoid lecturing. Where possible, focus on examples of people helping each other, like rescue workers or volunteers. Middle and high school students may want to go deeper and explore the politics or background of an event. You can also discuss strategies for problem solving after disasters.

Write About It
Narrative or journal writing can provide children with an outlet for their emotions. Written responses to traumatic news events may also help school professionals identify students who might need any additional social-emotional support.

Make a Plan
When disaster strikes, being prepared can reduce feelings of anxiety in adults, which contributes to calmer reactions in children. Learning how to be prepared can also instill a sense of control. In class, teachers can lead a lesson in disaster preparedness. At home, parents can create a family emergency plan. Visit www.ready.gov/plan for more information.

Get Back to Normal
Disasters disrupt and destabilize. As parents and educators encourage discussion around these events, they should also work to restore stability by limiting children's exposure to sensationalist news stories and by resuming familiar routines or creating new, comforting ones. A big part of recovery is recovering what was lost.