

3.20 Tips for Talking to Children About the News

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SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00

You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Season Three, Episode 20: "Five Tips for Talking to Children About the News."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:15

Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the confidence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together, we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want, a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:51

Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. Okay, I don't know about you, but the news has felt really overwhelming lately. And not just lately, actually. Now that I think about it, it's been quite a while: a year, more than a year, four years...I don't know. It just feels like it is current event after current event. And not usually the happy, exciting kind, mostly the really hard, the really sad, the really soul-crushing kind. Oh, my goodness, I have felt overwhelmed by the news and I can imagine that our children are feeling similarly. So I thought it might be helpful if I put together five tips that we can turn to when we need to talk to our children about current events. Now this can be your own children or this might be children in your classroom. Some of these tips I took from when I was teaching. The first time that the last president...I'll say "was elected"...was when I was in the classroom teaching. And so I felt like there was a lot of unprecedented news happening that I had to talk to seven- and eight-year-olds about. So some of these tips are just things that I have learned from experience, the things that I have found work best. And then some of them are things that I was able to research and find family psychologists who make suggestions about how to go about this age-appropriately with our children.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:27

Now before we jump in, I want to remind you that First Name Basis is hiring. We are looking for a communications director. I announced this a couple of weeks ago, and then it just flew out of my brain because the news has been ridiculous. But I am so excited to continue this search. So we are looking for someone who is extremely organized and loves to work on a team. You'll be working directly with me and just managing so much of the communications for First Name Basis, our inbox, you'll be helping me with Patreon, our email list, you'll have lots of different opportunities to be creative, whether that means creating graphics for First Name Basis, or working with me on collaboration opportunities; there are so many things that we can do together, and I'm just so excited to work with one of you. So if you are interested or you know someone who is interested, go to firstnamebasis.org/apply, click and fill out the application. I cannot wait to hear from you. And I will be sure to put that link in the show notes.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:32

Okay, let's get into it: my top five tips for talking to children, your children or others, about the news. The first tip that I have is to prepare with another adult. So if you are married, if you have a partner, if you have a grandparent that you can prepare with, if you're a teacher and you have a TA, I feel like it's so nice to kind of practice a little bit with another adult before you go in and talk to the children. And it's really important to decide what are your boundaries. What are your boundaries when it comes to news consumption? One thing that I want to emphasize is that psychologists do not recommend leaving the news on in the background, because the news is not created for children so it's often not age appropriate. So if they're watching, they might see something that they're just not sure how to process and especially those young kiddos, they really shouldn't be watching the news on their own. So just make sure that if you are interested in the news, you can find a specific time when you can watch on your own. And then you can decide what you want to share with the young people in your life.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:42

I'm sure you can already imagine that our family feels like it's really important for us to keep up with current events. And I've talked about this before, but it's important because oftentimes our safety is in question. As a member of a marginalized community, as a woman of color. I need to know what's going on in my community and in the nation, because my safety is at the center of that. So yes, I want to keep up with current events. So it's important that Carter and I talk together and decide when we're going to watch the news. And oftentimes, that means we are taking turns, we're taking turns reading articles, we're taking turns listening to the news, or if both of our children are sleeping, if they're taking naps, or it's after bedtime, then we can turn it on and watch together. But for the most part, we're switching off so that one person has their full attention on the kiddos and the other person can find out updates about what's going on. Now, this is not like every minute of every day. But I'm thinking about something like the insurrection on January 6 " that was definitely a day when we were tag-teaming the news, switching off the entire day, making sure that we were in tune so that we could figure out how to keep our family safe if that came into question.

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Jasmine Bradshaw 05:54

Another one of our boundaries, when it comes to the news, as a partnership that Carter and I have decided on is that we don't really talk about it in front of our kids. And if we do, we will use code words and code names and try to be really discreet, or it will be during screen time "maybe our kids are watching a movie and we can sneak away to another room and kind of have a quick conversation. But for the most part, we try to save it for after bedtime when it's just the two of us and we can really dig into how we're feeling and what we've learned and what we feel like we need to do for our family. That being said, there are times when I need a break from the news and Carter does an amazing job of swooping in and keeping up with everything that's going on and then giving me updates if I need them. He knows it's not something that he should share with me unless it's an emergency, because there are just sometimes when I need some space; we have to take care of ourselves. I remember there was one time I went to Disneyland with a couple of friends and I came home and he was like, "This happened and that happened while you were gone." And I was like, "Nope. I'm still in Disneyland mode. Please, please don't talk to me about the news right now." So it's just a matter of knowing where you're at mentally, what you can handle and what you can digest and taking breaks when you need to.

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Jasmine Bradshaw 07:14

But I do want to add that is always important to come back to it. You need to hold yourself accountable to being very in tune with what's going on around you in your community. Because as you've read, I'm sure as you've heard before, watching the news and being up to date on current events, is part of being civically engaged. And when I hear women say things, mostly women, say things like, "Oh, I don't watch the news, it's too sad," I help them understand that that really is a privilege when you are able to check out of something because it's sad. That means that it probably doesn't affect your life very much, which means that you are living a life that is very privileged, and that it's honestly unacceptable for you to not be involved in what's going on around you.

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Jasmine Bradshaw 08:01

And the last thing that I will say about preparing with another adult is that you can decide together what you're going to share, if anything, with the children in your life. So you can figure out together, what are we going to tell them? What are we going to hold back on? If it's something that you think they might learn from another source, like they might hear about it at school or at church, make sure that you cover it with them so that they're not confused when they get into that situation. So that is tip number one. Tip number one is to prepare with another adult if you have the opportunity.

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Jasmine Bradshaw 08:35

Tip number two is start by asking questions. So now we are moving into the actual conversation that you're going to be having with the child. You want to start by asking them what they know. So ask open-ended questions that will help you figure out what they know and what misconceptions they might have, because you might be surprised by what comes out of their

mouth. Sometimes when you say to a kid, "Hey, what do you know about what's going on in the news?" They come at you with something way out in left field. And you're like, "Where did you hear that?" So start with those open-ended questions, because children are always listening. And usually when we're talking about the news, we're talking about these events while they're around, but we're not actually talking to them. So make sure that you figure out what is it that they know, what is the foundation that they're working with. You can ask things like, "Have you heard anything about blank?" Or, "What do you know about blank?" That way you can have a really good starting point for the conversation. And especially if you have school-aged children be sure to ask them what they're hearing at school. Because as a former teacher, I can tell you, they say the most bonkers things when it comes to big news events. And so you can just say to them, "Hey, are people at school talking about this and what are they saying about it? What have you heard?" And it's just a perfect way to kick off that conversation. It's not awkward at all, and it's really inviting.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 10:04

The third tip I have for talking to children about the news is to tell the truth, age appropriately. Now, one of the biggest questions is, well, how do I know what they're ready for? And that's a really hard one to answer. But especially if it's your own child, I would tell you to trust yourself. You know your baby best, and you know what they're ready for. So make sure that you are talking to them in an age-appropriate way. I found two really amazing pieces of information about age appropriateness, and I want to share them with you. The first one says, quote, "Most kids realize the news is real by the time they are seven or eight years old." End quote. So this is from an article that I was reading in KidsHealth, called "How to Talk to Your Child About the News," and they were explaining that sometimes when kids see things on TV before they're seven and eight years old, they think that they're just watching a movie, they don't realize that this is something real that's actually going on. So understanding that by the time they're seven, they're probably catching on to "Oh, this isn't pretend. This is a real thing," then you can gauge what they're ready for and what they're not ready for when it comes to the details of the situation. The other really helpful piece of information I found was in an article that I was reading for teachers, and it was about how teachers can talk to their students about current events. And it says, quote, "'Through early adolescence, kids perceive all events as happening nearby,' says Margaret Nichols, PhD, director of the Erickson Institute Center for Children and Families. 'If they see a picture of a plane on fire, or soldiers fighting, they may not realize that they're seeing something from halfway around the world. Use a map or globe to give your child some perspective.'" End quote. So I thought that was really helpful and might be comforting to children to know that things aren't as close to home as they think they might be.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:01

Now, if this is something that's happening in your own backyard, or something that could potentially happen to you, like the police killings that have been happening in our communities that could absolutely happen to me or to a member of my family. That's another conversation, and we will tackle that at the end of the episode. So back to age appropriateness: one of the things to remember is that they really don't need to know every single detail. Give them enough so that they feel like they understand what happened. But definitely avoid those graphic images or details. A five-year-old does not need to see the police killing someone. That is very inappropriate. It's something that's going to be hard and scar them. As an adult I don't

need to be watching that, right? This is something that is very traumatic for humans in general. So just try your best to hit that sweet spot of enough information so that they know what's going on, but not too much that they're going to be scarred forever.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:59

Another thing is to help them understand that there's a reason that this stuff is on the news. On the Life Kit for Parents podcast, they said quote, "When there's stuff that happens, they put it on the news because it is unusual." End quote. This really stuck out to me because I was like, "Man, that's such a good point. Hopefully, this stuff is not occurring all the time." And I know it's hard because there are some situations in which it does. But a lot of times the news picks stories specifically because they are unusual, or because they are a catastrophe that doesn't usually happen. And this totally reminded me of when I was a little kid. I remember asking my mom one time, "Mom, why don't they write books about normal people? Why don't they write a book about a girl who wakes up and eats breakfast and goes to school, comes home does her homework and goes to bed?" And my mom was like, "Well, because that would be so boring. We don't want to read about something that is totally boring." And that's what the news is doing. They're looking for something that is going to catch people's attention and keep people's attention.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:07

Another thing that we can do is keep our children updated on positive current events. So help them see that there are really good things going on in the world as well. There are hard things, there are bad things. But there are great people doing great important work in the world, and we can focus on that too. So when we are telling the truth, age appropriately, it can be a little anxiety-provoking. I remember when I was teaching if I had to go in the next day and talk to my kiddos about something really hard that happened, I would feel really anxious. And one of the best things that I did to help myself, to help guide the conversation, is to see if I could find something to anchor myself in. For example, if you can find a book about the topic, or if you can find a video that you can watch together. You start with the book, you start with the video, and then you can really dig deep into the conversation. Then kids can ask questions and you can answer. And of course, you can always say that you don't know or you can look things up together. But having something to anchor yourself in is just so helpful.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:11

Another one of my favorite sources for older children is called CNN 10. It's the news in 10 minutes. So a lot of the teachers in my neighborhood, at the school that's right down the street from me, they use this for fifth and sixth graders and up. So they watch CNN 10 every day in order to anchor themselves and talk to their fifth and sixth graders about what's going on in the world and all the current events. One thing that I will say is that if you are going to use KidNuz or CNN 10, just be sure to pre-screen these news sources beforehand to make sure that you feel comfortable sharing them with your children or with your students. Because sometimes there'll be things on there that you're not quite ready to talk about, or something that you feel

like is better addressed at home. So just be sure to look into it and listen beforehand. I mean, CNN 10 is only 10 minutes. KidNuz is like seven minutes or less, so it's something that's super easy that you can do before you talk to them.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:11

One of my very favorite sources for news for younger children is called KidNuz. It is a kid's news podcast that you can listen to every single morning. They do such an amazing job of balancing tough news with great news. And it's KIDN-U-Z and you can find it on any podcasting app. I guess I want to give you a little sneak peek: next week, I actually get to interview the founder of KidNuz. She is fantastic. I'm so excited for you to hear from her. So that will be on the podcast next week. She and I were able to talk about media literacy and teaching our children how to interact with the news and where to find great sources. It's such a great conversation, a great interview, I can't wait for you to hear it. So definitely look into KidNuz. Whenever something hard happens, you can play KidNuz together and then talk about what was going on.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:03

And like I mentioned before, the last thing I want to say about telling the truth age appropriately, is that it's okay if you don't know. Just tell them, "Oh, wow, that's a really great question. Let me think about that. And we can talk about it again later." If you are going to do that, please make sure that you follow up, because that's how we build trust with our kiddos, with our children or with our students. Or you can look it up together right on the spot. So don't worry, if you don't know. We don't know everything. We don't have to be all-knowing and it gives kids an opportunity to see how do you find out information, important information, when you don't know something?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:43

Okay, so moving right along to tip number four. Tip number four is to center the conversation on your values. I got this amazing question over on our Patreon page. Now, if you're not sure, Patreon is a community of parents, teachers, anyone who has children in their lives, nannies, people who are really committed to justice and to teaching their children to be anti-racist and anti-bias. We get together each and every month and have a live question and answer session. And this is one of the questions that I got during the session. So this person was asking, "What do you do when your child sees more news than you want them to? Or when you react with big emotions?" This mom said, "My son saw my raw, unfiltered reaction to the horrors of today." She was referring to the insurrection on January 6. She said, "As well as a lot of the footage, I was so upset that I wasn't in the best parenting frame of mind, and probably did a poor job keeping my explanations age-appropriate for him. How do I backtrack and maybe readdress it in a more developmentally appropriate way?" She mentioned that he is in kindergarten, and I just wanted to share my response with you because I thought, "Man, I bet we are all going to be in this situation at some point." So let's just keep these tips in the front of our mind. I said, "I would start the conversation by sitting down together and making a list of your family values." So think about kindness, fairness, using words instead of violence, speaking up when we see someone who needs help, telling the truth, etc. Then from there, I would explain that the reason why what happened yesterday, talking about January 6, was so wrong and so difficult

for you to watch is because those people were not acting in accordance to your values. Explain that there are a lot of people in the world who share your same values and try to do their best to honor them, but there will always be people who don't. And when that happens, we have a responsibility to try to make sure everyone knows that what they're doing is wrong. Tell him that we all choose whether to honor our values and that those people chose not to honor their values. I also suggested that she tell him that one day, he will be in a position to make that choice and that you as his mom hopes that he will choose to stand up for what's right. And of course, you want to explain that it's totally okay for us to all feel big emotions when our values are broken, and that is what happened yesterday on January 6. And then of course, I would ask what questions he has about what he saw and what he heard, and then answer them by connecting them to the values that you have and how they were broken.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:32

So I hope that those thoughts are helpful for you as well. And I think it's so critical that we really dig into our values here, instead of saying, "Those are bad people, we need to say that those people are doing a bad thing," because we want our children to understand how to parcel out that people do good things, people do bad things, and that's just the nature of being a human being right? It's really hard when we see people that we feel like we should be able to trust doing bad things. But they are just people, and that's what happens. That's part of living in this world is that we're going to see a lot of people that we love and trust make mistakes, and we are going to make mistakes as well. And we need to hold ourselves accountable. We need to take responsibility when we do make those mistakes. But rooting ourselves in our values instead of saying, "Those people are bad" or calling names, really helps our kids understand where we stand, and what we expect of them. One other thing that I would have added to this response " I found this on Common Sense Media " they said make sure that they know that it is not anything that they did. So when we're talking to our kids about violence, or stuff that we are seeing, make sure that our children understand that our big emotions don't have anything to do with their behavior or anything that they have done.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:58

We have arrived at tip number five, our final tip for talking to children about the news. And that is to make them feel safe. One of the biggest things that we can do is listen to understand, don't listen to respond. So while you're having this conversation, you might be sitting and thinking about what to say next. But it's really important that your child knows that this is a conversation and not a lecture. So when you're listening to them, and you're listening to their concerns, you can understand how they're feeling. And then you can go from there. But if you're just listening and thinking about "Okay, what do I want to say next?" or "I want to make sure to hit this point," they might not be able to feel that connection with you. And one of our biggest goals is that they come back to us, right? They come back to us again when they see or hear something that makes them anxious or scared. We want that line of communication to be open. So when we are listening to understand what's going on in their little minds, and in their little hearts, they will be able to feel safe with us. I was reading an article by Kurtz Psychology about how to talk to kids about current events. And they had an amazing tip it says quote, "During these conversations, caregivers should reassure their children, but must also be cautious about making promises they cannot keep. For example, if your child is feeling worried, reiterate to them: remember that I am always doing my best to keep you safe, or explain the

ways in which they can keep themselves safe." End quote. So unfortunately, we will not always be able to protect our children from everything. I know as parents that is the most crushing anxiety and it can bring the deepest pain. But helping our kids understand that I will always do my best to keep you safe is different from telling them nothing bad will ever happen to you. Because that's just not true.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:56

One of the things that we do as a family, and I'm talking about as an extended family, like with my parents, one of the things we do is that we talk about what we will do to keep our family safe. So we have a very well-thought-out plan for what we will do if we need to leave our homes for some reason. If something happens in our neighborhood or in our community, and we don't feel safe anymore, my entire family has a plan for what we're going to do; where we're going to go. And it's just really important that we communicate that with one another. And that's kind of what I was talking about earlier when I said that a lot of times there are things that are happening that are far away from us, that are far away from our children that are happening halfway across the world. But there are some things that happen in our own backyard and there are some things that could very well happen to us. So if there was a police shooting in my community, what would I do? How would I respond? What would our family do? We've talked about that together because that's our reality. We have to have those conversations. So especially if you have older kids, there are tons of things online about how you can prepare for an emergency, even something like a forest fire or a tornado. You want to talk about that stuff beforehand, so that you all know what's the plan, what are you going to do.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:16

Another tip that they mentioned on the Life Kit for Parents podcast that I thought was really helpful was that they said to give examples of something similar that has happened in the past, and how the community or how our nation has worked together has come together to work through that event. So are there instances that you can turn to for hope and for reassurance after a tragedy happens? And the last thing I want to say about making your children feel safe, is to prepare the environment. What do you know, that makes your child feel their very best, feel their very snuggliest? For my little Violet, she has this blanket that she loves and that she takes everywhere. Oh my goodness, I can't imagine what we're going to do when she starts going to school and how we're going to break her of her blankie. But anyway, what is it that makes your kiddo feel like they are really comfy and really safe, make sure that you are snuggling up to them, put your arm around them and just have this conversation in a space where they feel comfortable, where they feel protected, so that they can ask you those tough questions if they need to.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:32

All right, so I hope that this was really helpful. Those top five tips again for talking to your children about the news are: number one, prepare with another adult if you can; number two, start by asking questions; number three, tell the truth age appropriately; number four, center the conversation around your values; and number five, make them feel safe. Here's the thing, y'all. As much as I want to have a boring new cycle, we are in a really important period of civil

rights. We're in an important period of working towards justice and reimagining what our communities can look like. And that is so great. It took me a while to find the word because it feels really painful, but it is really good. And when we are going through these times of change, it's going to be hard. So we're going to continue to have to have these tough conversations, there's going to continue to be really hard, sad, heartbreaking things on the news. But I think that we'll come out the other end a better nation, a better community. So even though it's hard, I still try my very best to cling to hope. And I hope that you can, too.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 27:54

My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you, and how deeply I know that when we work together, we can make real change in our communities. Any of the books, podcasts or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes and everything is linked there so you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram @first.name.basis. If you're interested in partnering with First Name Basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org. All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon.