

Covering Children and Youth

A DART CENTER TIP SHEET FOR COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISORS, EDITORS AND STUDENT JOURNALISTS

When covering children and youth who have experienced a traumatic event, a reporter must approach the situation with respect, care and professionalism.

When a traumatic event occurs, children and youth may provide important voices and opinions to a news story. However, dealing with this population requires certain newsgathering and reporting techniques.

This tip sheet covers basic guidelines that can help you work with children and youth as sources for news stories.

NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING STAGE

The risk of vulnerability. When gathering information from children and/or youth, be aware that your interview and the published story could have a real impact on them. Before embarking on any interview with a child, be sure it is completely necessary (i.e. adds a critical component or dimension to your story).

According to Investigative Reporter Ruth Teichroeb, “Children’s vulnerability means they have a right to greater privacy even if such heightened protection is not provided by law. Journalists must respect that right despite the competitive pressures of news coverage. Protecting child victims from further trauma should take precedence over getting a good quote.”

Conduct thorough research. Just as you would with any other type of story, conduct thorough research ahead of time before contacting a child or youth. If the child or youth has experienced a trauma, gather as much information as you can from parents, relatives, counselors, and others about the traumatic event before seeking to interview the child or youth. You don’t want the interview to trigger him or her unnecessarily when it may be possible to collect and corroborate that information from other sources.

According to Teichroeb, “Children younger than 13 should not be relied upon to provide detailed factual accounts. Use documents and other sources to corroborate whenever possible.”

Know the laws or guidelines. Certain states have laws or guidelines related to interviewing and identifying children or youth. The Student Press Law Center provides some good tips for approaching children and youth: <http://www.splc.org/knowyourrights/legalresearch.asp?id=107>

Know your publication’s policy on source identification. Talk with your media advisor or editor to find out the policies for identifying youth or children in news stories and plan accordingly. If your publication doesn’t have a policy, discuss with your advisor or editor the risks involved. Here are a few other sources on identifications of minors:

- [Best practices on minor identification from Associated Press](#)
- [RTNDA guidelines on identifying minors in news stories](#)

Informed consent. When you are ready to do your interviews, get permission from the parent or consenting adult before interviewing the child or youth. It's also important to inform the consenting adult or parent about the reason for your interview, what the story is about, if and how the interview will be recorded, and where the information will be published. This will enable them to make an informed decision about whether to allow the child or youth to participate, as well as put them at ease and develop rapport. If possible, have a parent or consenting adult present during the interview.

Interview tips. Before you start the interview, find a quiet location in which to conduct the interview. Allow the child or youth to have some control over the interview by selecting the location, etc.

Tell the child or youth who you are and give him or her a sense of what the interview will be about. Let him or her know that they can choose to answer all of the questions or only those they want to.

Don't be condescending. Children and youth are smarter than you think and know when they are being talked down to. Treat them with respect.

More resources:

- [Interviewing Children: Guidelines for Journalists](#)
- [When Subjects are Young, The Rules Change](#)
- [Children and Media: Coverage of Trauma](#)
- [Covering Youth Violence](#)

Listen and take your time. Ask open-ended questions that allow the child or youth to tell his or her own story. Give them time to explain their story and don't rush them. Have a listening ear. You will find that the child or youth may drift in and out of the interview and talk about other things. Allow this to happen. It may be their way of trying to find an answer to your questions or coping with memories around the traumatic event.

Keep the interview short. According to Teichroeb, "Keep the interview to age-appropriate lengths: thirty minutes for those under age 9, forty-five minutes for children between 10 and 14 and one hour for teens."

Don't get involved. Remember you are not there as their friend. You are there to tell their story. If the child needs guidance or help, provide the parent or consenting adult information about how they can reach a local counselor, a help hotline, etc.

WRITING THE STORY

Discern what is important. When writing the story, you may get more information than you need from the child or youth. Think about whether it is necessary to publish all of the details. Does it enhance the story? Does it harm or embarrass the child or youth? Not everything obtained through the interview needs to be published.

Vulnerability and protection. It's important to remember that children and youth are impressionable and often vulnerable. As the journalist, it is your responsibility to use your best judgment in deciding what you publish. This may mean leaving details out of a story or not disclosing the child or youth's name. Make sure to check with your editor/adviser on your publication's policy for identifying children or youth and protecting their privacy.

Avoid stereotypes. When writing a story, don't default to stereotypes. Inappropriate disclosures can hurt or harm a child or youth as well as others in the community.

Don't publish photos of children without consent. Think carefully about whether it is worth publishing a photo of a child or youth. Recognize that a photo that reveals the identity of a child or youth can have a long-term impact.

AFTER PUBLICATION

Contact family. Once the story is published, contact the family or consenting adult and share the story with them. If they want their child or youth to see it, they can make that decision themselves. As the journalist, it's not your decision to make.

Impact of stories. Your story and broader news coverage of a traumatic event can have a significant impact on a child or youth. Research shows that children are attentive to news and consume more of it after a tragedy. Studies show that after viewing graphic images or videos of a traumatic event, some children have exhibited symptoms of PTSD as a result of the exposure to such media.

According to Christina Cantrell and Elana Newman, "There is a positive relationship between exposure to media coverage of tragedy and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder among children. However, it is unknown if upset children seek out media coverage of tragedy, have distressed parents who seek out such news, if the news causes distress, if the news acts as a traumatic reminder to elicit pre-existing distress, or if there is some other causal mechanism to account for this association."

It's important to recognize that your story will not only inform your campus community, but also impact the individuals you have interviewed whether they are adults and/or youth and children. Keep this in mind when covering traumatic events and know that your reporting approach should always be ethical, professional, respectful and humane at all times.