

Fear of the News



It is not possible to try to shelter young people from discussion of the horrors of terrorist attacks. What is essential is to allow questions and debate while showing what is democratic and what is unacceptable

Sharing bad news is, sometimes, unavoidable. The recent terror attacks in London Bridge and Manchester Arena have dominated headlines and much of the general election campaign narrative over the past month. They have been broadcast on our TV screens, in our newspapers and, increasingly, across social media. As adults, this type of news can be difficult to digest, but for young people, the confusion and fear may be overwhelming.

Terrible events like these are likely to be discussed in schools across the country and beyond, and teachers have a duty to ensure that these conversations are conducted in as calm, thoughtful and rational a way as possible. Talking about subjects such as terrorism can ignite wider discussions about politics, history or prejudice, all of which are so important in helping young people understand the world around them.

The overwhelming advice seems to be that teachers and parents should be proactive. It might be tempting to try to shield young people from bad news, but after shocking events such as these, they will absorb a huge amount of information from social media and from their own peers. Adults can do a lot to temper what they take in, clarify their misperceptions and alleviate their fear.

Rather than shying away from controversial topics, teachers should encourage their discussion in the classroom. Schools need to provide a safe space where terrorism is discussed openly, so that students can understand any risks, and develop the knowledge required to challenge inaccuracies.

Professionals advise teachers to be open and honest themselves: voicing their opinions where

appropriate; asking their own questions, as well as encouraging those of their students; and sharing in any confusion. They can start by asking what they have heard, and respond accordingly. Consultant clinical psychologist Emma Citron, who specialises in children and trauma, told BBC News that we can ask them what they would like to know and then give them access to that. We should take the lead from them; but we need to know what it is they want answers to.

Alongside these discussions is a growing need for neutral, unbiased news resources that avoid partisan narratives and opinions masquerading as fact. Social media propagates “fake news” rapidly, and it can be hard for young people to filter out what is real. After the Manchester Arena attack, false photos of the scene were shared online, and rumours circulated of a gunman at Oldham General Hospital seven miles away. Stories like these might be shared hundreds of thousands of times before any credible source corrects them, and by then damage is done.

Teachers should use good-quality, age-appropriate news content to facilitate informed classroom discussions and encourage students to question the news they absorb. Group exercises and peer-to-peer debates can allow students to share ideas more honestly, and learn from their classmates.

At The Day, the current affairs website for schools for which I work, we encourage students to think critically about the news, ask questions and develop their own opinions. We produce articles that include discussion points and links to further reading so that students can engage in reasoned debate, and understand that others’ views may differ from theirs.

There are a number of other resources that might be helpful in teaching students to think critically about the news. Debating Matters is a national debate competition for sixth formers, and Educate Against Hate is a website designed to tackle extremism and radicalisation through short films, classroom exercises and practical guides.

While it is important to encourage open discussion, certain views need to be challenged, and sometimes even reported, according to guidance from Prevent. This is a duty on all schools and registered early years providers to have due regard to preventing people being drawn into terrorism. Teachers in the UK have a legal obligation to identify individuals at risk of radicalisation; but this is a difficult balance to strike. On the one hand, students should be taught that there is no one right answer, that they can ask questions honestly and share different views. On the other, teachers must be clear that certain ideas – which threaten others’ safety or sympathise with terrorists, for example – are unacceptable. Freedom of expression in schools is so important in teaching the values of democracy. It is in the interests of young people and society as a whole to encourage free and reasoned debate wherever possible, but the Prevent duty requires teachers to monitor certain behaviours and ideas.

The Association for Citizenship Teaching has published a guide to support schools in their teaching of controversial issues, and help them resolve this tension. It recommends exploring the balance between rights and freedom, asking questions such as “How much freedom should people have in relation to freedom of speech, association or religious expression?” and “How are individual rights qualified and restricted?”

Where there are misunderstandings, teachers should try to correct them. Children, and adults too, can be short-sighted. They sometimes generalise in order to make sense of an issue — conflating Islamic

terrorists with all Muslims, for example — so it is important that teachers correct these prejudices.

Terror attacks are frightening, and the immediate aftermath can be overwhelming. But where there is violence there is also good: emergency responders on the scene; civilians offering their homes to strangers; blood donors queuing up round the block; taxi drivers offering free rides. Reminding young people of this can help alleviate their fear and put the events in perspective.

There is a well-known quote from US children's television host, Fred Rogers, which often circulates on social media in the wake of horrific events: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping'."

Advice from professionals overwhelmingly suggests that children should not be isolated from controversial news. Discussions about terrorism are crucial in helping them understand the world, and that is what teachers should aim to do.

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