**How Media Exposure to Global Crises Affects Children’s Mental Health**

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**Abstract**

Children today are growing up in a world where media exposure is constant, and global crises are increasingly visible through screens. This paper examines how media coverage of crises, such as wars, disasters, and pandemics, affects children’s anxiety and development. Drawing on psychological and communication theories, it identifies why children are especially vulnerable. Early screen exposure disrupts sensory processing and emotional regulation, while age and dependence on adults limit coping strategies. Through social learning, children imitate fear and distress from media, and social inequality heightens these risks. Mechanisms such as sensory overload and secondary trauma explain how indirect crisis exposure produces anxiety and post-traumatic stress-like symptoms. These effects appear in both emotional development, where children show heightened fear and withdrawal, and in social cognition, where distorted worldviews and stereotypes form. To reduce harm, the paper suggests practical solutions: stricter media content regulation, school-based media literacy, family guidance, and accessible mental health support. Future research should compare age groups, track long-term outcomes, and examine how different media restrictions affect children’s responses and mental health. Together, these insights stress that media exposure to global crises is not only about information transfer but also about children’s mental health and resilience.

*Keywords*: Media exposure, Childhood anxiety, Global crises, Sensory overload, Secondary trauma

**Introduction**

In the 21st century, children and adolescents engage with social media more than ever. In the United Kingdom, almost all children aged 3-17 (96%) went online in 2024, reflecting the central role of the internet in their lives (Ofcom, 2025). Social media platforms and television news can deliver real-time images with strong emotional impact. At the same time, global crises have become more frequent and severe, from the 2008 financial crash to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events affect many countries simultaneously but with uneven local consequences: some groups benefit, while other suffer disproportionately. This disparity undermines trust in institutions and can influence individual well-being (Davvetas et al., 2022).

These crises spread not only through politics and economics but also through the media, which turns them into psychological events for children. Media expose young audiences to violent or disturbing scenes, placing their mental health and development at risk. Anxiety may appear when fear and worry extend beyond what is typical for their age (CDC, 2024). Even indirect exposure can cause trauma-like symptoms. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, 5.4% of children developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms despite no direct exposure, and those who personally connected with victims faced more than double the risk (Otto et al., 2007). These findings show that screens can act as a pathway to trauma.

This paper examines how media coverage of global crises affects children’s anxiety and emotional development. It will first explain their vulnerabilities and the mechanisms through which anxiety forms, then considers impacts on emotional growth and social cognition, and finally suggests potential solutions.

**Psychological Vulnerabilities in Children**

Children are especially vulnerable to media exposure because their brains and emotional systems are still developing. Research shows that early digital media use can disturb children’s sensory processing. Heffler et al. (2024) found that toddlers with high screen exposure faced greater risks of atypical sensory responses, which are associated with emotional problems, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and autism traits. This suggests that vulnerability begins at the biological level, where developing sensory pathways can be easily overstimulated, creating long-term difficulties in emotional regulation.

Children also depend heavily on parents and schools during their development, which limits their capacity to cope with stress (Greene et al., 2017). Their emotional sensitivity makes them especially reactive to victim-centered images, such as rescue or escape scenes, which can trigger fear, nightmares, or sleep disturbances (Ohnuma et al., 2023). Age also plays a roles as younger children are more easily frightened because they lack coping strategies, while older children are more likely to link crisis images to their own lives (Koo, 2021). Thus, vulnerability arises from both developmental stage and dependence, since coping skills are not yet developed.

Social learning theory helps explain their vulnerability. Children learn not only from direct experience but also from observing others (Bandura, 1977). Exposure to violence, victims, or fearful reactions on screens can be copied or internalised, shaping children’s sense of safety (Smith et al., 2024). Evidence from recent crises supports this. Strasser et al. (2022) showed that greater exposure to COVID-19 news correlated with poorer mental health among youth. Social inequality exacerbates the problem: children in low-income families tend to encounter more crisis-related media and have fewer supports, so they show stronger stress responses that affect both the brain and body (Leiner et al., 2016). This means vulnerability is social as well, because children copy what they see on screens and suffer more if they lack protective resources. In short, children’s immature neurodevelopment, their tendency to copy, and their strong emotional reactions to crisis images all combine to make them more vulnerable than adults when facing negative media.

**Mechanisms of Anxiety Formation**

Children can develop anxiety from media exposure through different pathways. One is sensory overload. Milgram (1970) said that in cities people face more sensory input than the nervous system can process, leading them to cope by filtering or withdrawing. This helps for a short time, but excessive or prolonged overload can cause stress, anxiety, and social detachment. This frameworks explains how constant visual and auditory stimulation from media can overwhelm children’s developing nervous systems.

Research has applied this idea to digital media. Heffler et al. (2024) found that toddlers with early screen use were more likely to show atypical sensory responses, like hyper-sensitivity and avoidance, which are linked to emotional problems and ADHD. Fan (2022) found that teenagers using TikTok often had trouble focusing, more anxiety, and feelings of detachment from reality. These studies suggests that modern media works like Milgram’s “overloaded city”, flooding children with too much input that their brains cannot fully manage. This makes sensory overload a key pathway to child anxiety.

Another mechanism is secondary trauma. Figley (1995) described how individuals can develop stress reactions simply by witnessing the trauma of others. Children exposed to disaster or war victims may display PTSD-like symptoms such as fear, avoidance, and hypervigilance. Ben-Zur et al. (2012) also found that repeated exposure to terrorism coverage in the media was linked to stronger post-traumatic symptoms. These findings show that children’s anxiety does not require direct exposure. Instead, repeated viewing of others’ suffering is enough to leave lasting psychological effects.

**Impact on Emotional Development and Social Cognition**

Emotional development is the first area harmed by media exposure. Heffler et al. (2024) show that early and heavy screen use makes children more sensitive to fear and weakens emotional control. Such problems may therefore originate at the biological level. Bowker et al (2022) add that social withdrawal often follows poor emotional regulation, producing anxiety, loneliness, and peer problems. These issues worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social limits increased isolation. This shows that media-induced anxiety is not just temporary. For already withdrawn children, repeated negative media makes fear and avoidance stronger, which deepens isolation and reduces social participation.

Media also affects how children see the world. Gerbner and Gross (1976) argued that television cultivates a shared but distorted reality, where repeated violent or victim images make people believe the world is unsafe. For children, who do not yet have mature thinking skills, such images can set long-term patterns of fear and distrust. This not only raises anxiety but also encourages social withdrawal. In addition, media can strengthen prejudice and stereotypes. Lai et al. (2015) showed that heavy exposure to specific kinds of media leads audiences to share biased cultural and social views. When children watch negative reports about wars or terrorism, they may begin to see certain groups as dangerous or weak. In this way, selective media representations shape both their worldview and their attitudes toward others. These patterns limit not only children’s sense of safety but also their ability to build fair and open views of other groups.

**Solutions and Interventions**

Since crisis coverage clearly harms children’s well-being, practical solutions are needed at multiple levels. First, media platforms should take more responsibility. Following the advice of WHO (2024), platforms should set age-based restrictions and add warning labels to content about war, disasters, or violence. They can also provide short mental health tips with such content. This gives children and parents a clear signal before they view harmful material.

Second, schools and families need to support children through education. Media literacy and emotion regulation courses can help students understand crisis news and learn coping strategies. Parents should also guide children by co-viewing and discussing the content. This is important because Strasser et al. (2022) showed that news exposure during COVID-19 had a strong impact on young people’s mental health. Guidance from teachers and parents can lower these risks. This shows that guidance from adults is critical, since children cannot fully regulate their own responses.

Third, mental health support must be available. Figley (1995) explained that even indirect exposure to trauma can cause stress and avoidance. Counseling and group therapy after crisis reports can reduce anxiety and help children recover. Together, media, education and mental health interventions must work hand in hand to protect children.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniable that rapid advances in technology and social media have greatly improved opportunities for learning and information sharing. However, media exposure can simultaneously make children anxious, harm their emotions, and shape a distorted view of the world, leading to poor social functioning and increased social withdrawal. They may also see the world as unsafe or form biased ideas about other groups. Because of this, media platforms, schools, families, and mental health services all need to work together to control the exposure to digital content especially in the youth. Future research could explore how to reduce the long-term risks that come from constant exposure to negative news. Studies can follow children over time to observe and compare the effectiveness of different interventions and their effects on anxiety and other mental health outcomes (Plackett, 2023).With stronger evidence and coordinated action, society can develop safeguards that ensure media platforms are safer and constructive for future generations.

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