

Talking to Children and Teens About the War in Ukraine

Guidance for parents/caregivers and other caring adults

The war in Ukraine is distressing to all of us. Children and teens are wondering about what has happened and what is expected. Like adults, they are better able to cope with upsetting news and images when they understand more about the situation. The following suggestions will help adults support children in a constructive and helpful way.

ASK: WHAT HAVE YOU ALREADY HEARD?

Begin by asking children what they already know. Children have likely heard about the war in Ukraine and its regional and global impact. This information may come from TV, the internet, social media, school, friends, or from overhead comments among adults.

However, much of their information may not be accurate. As children explain what they know about the situation, look for misunderstandings or frightening rumors. Acknowledge confusion. You might explain that even adults do not know all that is going on—news reports can change quickly or provide conflicting viewpoints.

RESPOND WITH HONEST REASSURANCE AND DO NOT DISCOUNT FEARS

Adults are concerned about a range of aspects of the crisis—worries about the safety and well-being of civilians in Ukraine; concerns that Russia has nuclear weapons that may be used in Ukraine or other countries; fears that Russia or another country might attack the United States in a similar manner; or broader concerns about the financial impact of the war here in the United States and how that may place stress on family finances.

Children may have some of these same concerns, but they often have very different apprehensions from adults as well. This is why it is so important that we ask children directly

about their worries or concerns. We can't provide effective reassurance to people until we know what specific concerns they have. Provide honest explanations to correct misunderstandings or misinformation, but don't ignore or minimize children's fears. Help children identify ways to cope with anxiety, sadness, and fears rather than pretend that they don't or shouldn't exist.

Children and youth understand and react differently according to their developmental age and unique personal experiences. The amount of detail that children will find useful therefore will vary. The older the child is, the more discussion will likely be needed to answer their questions and address their concerns.

Begin by providing the basic information in simple and direct terms. For example, explain how the war is likely to impact them and their family personally. Then ask if they have any questions. Take your cues from children to determine how much information to provide. Older children may wish to discuss the larger implications of the event, such as what impact this has on security in other countries, or the financial impact in Europe and in the United States.

Provide honest reassurance whenever possible. Emphasize that our government and other individuals and groups in the United States and elsewhere are taking active steps to try to improve the situation for Ukrainian citizens and to keep all of us safe. Children often look for reassurance that they are now safe after such graphic reminders of violence and interpersonal conflict.

AVOID EXPOSURE TO GRAPHIC IMAGES AND REPETITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

While it is useful for children to know enough to feel that

they understand what has occurred, it isn't helpful for children (or adults) to be exposed to graphic images, massive amounts of information, or continuous, repetitive media coverage. Such images and details are often included in coverage of war on television, radio, and print media, as well as in social media and elsewhere on the internet.

Evocative interviews of those injured in war or the families and friends of those who died, even if they don't show any physical violence or destruction, can be very unsettling. These may trigger feelings of grief for children who have experienced the death of a friend or family member, even if unrelated to violence. The COVID pandemic, for example, has left many children with such losses. Limit the amount of exposure to media coverage and discussion in social media. Consider this an opportunity to take a time out from television, computers, and phones and come together as a family and community for discussion and support.

RECOGNIZE THAT SOME CHILDREN MAY BE AT GREATER RISK OF DISTRESS

Some children will be impacted more than others and may need greater assistance coping. Obviously, if children have family or friends in Ukraine, this war will feel very close to home. But children with no personal relationship to Ukraine or its people may also be at risk of having troubling reactions.

For example, children who live in communities characterized by high rates of violence may become more concerned about their own physical safety. Those who are part of communities in the US that have experienced racial discrimination may feel an increase in distress and anger when hearing about acts of aggression and bias in Ukraine. Children who have experienced poverty or food insecurity may feel anxious hearing stories of families with limited food or money for other basic necessities. Stories from the war may be triggering for children who have themselves survived wars or other trauma, or whose families have experienced refugee status.

Children who have had general challenges with anxiety or depression before the war are also likely to benefit from additional support at this time.

PROVIDE THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS

Children and teens are likely to ask a number of common questions in times of crisis and upheaval. Choose answers that provide honest information and helpful reassurance. Some examples:

Could I have done anything to prevent this?

Many of us are wondering if our country could have done more to prevent this war from happening. Even though it seems obvious to adults that there is nothing children could have done to prevent the war, children may feel helpless and wish they could have changed what has happened. Let children know that this is a common reaction—we all wish that there is something we could have done. Reassure children that our country is doing all it can to respond effectively, keep us safe, and end the war. Suggest steps that can help those affected (write letters, say prayers, learn more about Ukrainian culture), and encourage children to work to promote safety, tolerance, and acceptance in our own communities.

Whose fault is it?

It is natural to engage in thoughts of blame. In some ways, blaming is a way we feel we can regain control of uncomfortable feelings and diminish a sense of personal risk.

However, when individuals and groups take violent, aggressive action against those they deem “responsible,” their actions are often misdirected and harm innocent people. They may focus on people who are easy to identify for blame—such as people who look like they might belong to a group that includes those responsible.

This misguided blame does not ease the immediate feelings of grief and fear. They complicate and worsen matters instead of providing solutions for the future. We must remember that not all citizens of Russia are responsible for the actions of the Russian government. People of Russian descent, including American citizens, should not be blamed for the war, but they may become frightened if they feel wrongly accused or worry about being targeted. As Americans, we take pride that our population includes many different races, religions, sexual orientations, and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together in our country and continue to be inclusive, accepting, and supportive of all who seek peace.

Is this going to change my life?

Children and teens are often very concerned about themselves. When there is a crisis, they may become even more concerned about what affects them personally. They may act immaturely. Sometimes adults see this as being selfish or uncaring.

Expect children to think more about themselves for the time being. Once they feel reassured that they are being listened to and their needs will be met, they are more likely to be able to start to think about the needs of others.

Can I help?

Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to help. Though there may be little that they can do to help the immediate victims of violence in Ukraine, there are positive things they can do. They can start by taking care of themselves—telling you when they are upset or worried, being honest and open. They can also offer help to other members of their community—their friends and classmates, their teacher, and other adults. They can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for the victims and survivors of the war—perhaps by working with charitable organizations as a family or school project.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT KNOWING THE PERFECT THING TO SAY

Often what children and teens need most is to have someone they trust listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing the perfect thing to say—there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their thoughts and concerns. Answer their questions with simple, direct, and honest responses. Provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep children from ever having to hear about the horrors of war, the ready availability of news and images of the war does not allow this.

Being silent about the war won't protect children from what happened—it will only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Not communicating about what is happening in the war may actually increase anxiety, leading children to imagine that there are more dangerous and personally threatening events about to occur.

WAR IS DISTRESSING—CHILDREN MAY FEEL UPSET

During these discussions, children may show that they are upset. They may cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are struggling. Remember, it is the details about the war that are upsetting them, not the discussion.

Talking about the war will permit them the opportunity to show you how upset they really are. This is the first step in coping with their feelings and adjusting to their new understanding of the world. Pause the conversation periodically so that you can provide support and comfort. If they are quite upset, ask if they wish to continue the discussion at another time.

It is helpful for children to realize that it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings. They will then be left to deal with them alone. Share your own feelings and model positive ways you cope with them.

BRING THE TOPIC UP, EVEN IF CHILDREN DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT

When a major world crisis of this magnitude occurs, it is a good idea to bring the topic up with children, even if they are quite young. At first, older children and teens may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is generally not a good idea to force them to talk with you; keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Let them know you are available when they are ready to talk and let them choose the time.

The war is evolving over time. So will children's questions and feelings. You do not need to cover the topic in one long conversation. Recognize this will likely be the first of multiple conversations you will continue over time.

SEEK FURTHER SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WHEN THEY NEED IT

When a war results in this amount of death and destruction, it is natural to be upset. However, if children continue to be very upset for several days, seem unable to cope with their fears, or are having trouble in school, at home or with their friends, it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. The war may have triggered other distressing experiences, worries, or concerns. You may wish to speak with a teacher or school counselor, pediatrician, mental health professional or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you don't need to wait until you think they need counseling. Take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

FIND MORE ANSWERS

For more resources, visit [SchoolCrisisCenter.org](https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org), the website of the [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement \(NCSCB\)](https://www.ncscb.org).

For information on how to support children who are grieving, visit [GrievingStudents.org](https://www.grievingstudents.org), the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](https://www.coalitiontosupportgrievingstudents.org).

Prepared March 7, 2022