

Talking with children about war

Whatever age you are, war is scary and can create serious distress and uncertainty. As a caregiver, it can be difficult to know how to talk to the children in your care about these issues.

While there is no easy way to explain something so troubling and complicated, here are some suggestions on how to get started.



Understand and process your own feelings first

Children look to the adults in their lives for guidance and signals on how they themselves should feel. Ideally, you will be able to talk to the children in your care with a sense of calm or at least from a place of being in control of what you can control. With this in mind, whatever you're personally going through and feeling, do your best to gain an understanding of it and to take steps to manage and cope with your own emotions first.

Depending on your situation – including more difficult scenarios, such as if you have loved ones at risk in the war, have a partner being deployed to the war zone or are a survivor of a past war, among other situations – you may be feeling a lot of intense emotions, such as anxiety, depression, fear, trauma or another form of agony. The better grasp of your own emotions you can gain, the better able you will be to help the children in your care navigate their own distress. (If you are coping with a mental health condition, consider consulting a physician, mental health care specialist or a support group for help.)

That isn't to say that you should not show or have emotions. It is OK to tell children in an age-appropriate way what you're feeling and why, but ideally you can do so while also communicating what you are doing to the best of your ability to cope in the moment and given the circumstances. By sharing how you're managing your own emotions and practicing self-care, you can role model and teach the children healthy ways to recognise their own emotions, use coping skills and build resilience.



Start an honest conversation

Assume that children of school age and older are at least vaguely aware of what's going on in the world, whether directly or indirectly through the internet, TV shows, social media, overheard conversations, etc. It's best to get in front of what they may be hearing to help them sort the information, especially considering how quickly misinformation (and disinformation) can spread.

Begin by asking them what they know, for example, about the war, and listen to what they say with genuine interest and minimal interruptions. In some cases, the child won't want to talk about it – and that's OK. Just be sure to let them know that you are there for them when they are ready to talk. And plan to check in with them again on the topic after some time has passed.

If they do open up, listen without judgement. Let them talk and validate their feelings. (Yes, it is scary. Yes, people are in danger.) Answer their questions with gentle honesty and realism. If you don't know the answer, tell them you do not know or, if accurate, that the answer is unknowable. Do your best to provide perspective with accurate (age-appropriate) information, without inflaming, disregarding or invalidating their feelings. Meaning, level with them about what's happening in general and with regard to their and other loved one's safety and wellbeing.

For example, if they do not live near the war area and they are safe from it, explain that. If they do live near the war-torn region, you can explain to them where they are in proximity to what's happening and share the measures and precautions being taken to help keep them and yourself safe. If their parent or someone they care about is in the war, it's OK to acknowledge that person's safety is at risk, but the person is, for example, trained and doing the best they can to keep themselves and others safe.

Expect to have more than one conversation about this and that they likely will repeat the same questions several times. Keep the communication open, and let them know that you are here for them. Also, share with them ways to deal with stress, so they can learn how to cope.

Also, importantly, as part of this process, help them understand that the people of a nation are not necessarily representative of or in support of the actions their government takes. So, for example, they should not harbor ill will or negative feelings toward people who are citizens or descendants of nationals of a certain country.

Limit their exposure

Pay attention to what children see or hear on TV, radio and online. Consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on the news events of the war. Too much information on one topic can lead to anxiety.

If they're in the thick of the events, help them find a safe place or way to at least momentarily get away from the swirl of uncertainty, headlines and other people's strong emotions. It could be as simple as quietly singing a song together, playing a game or making a meal. Whatever it is, give them (and yourself) a break.

Help them manage their emotions

Engage children in creative activities – such as through playing, drawing, writing or some other form of expression – to help them process what they're feeling in a safe way and a supportive environment. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness.

Also, help them find ways to relax, such as by taking deep breaths, stretching or meditating, and encourage them to do activities they enjoy, like playing outside, dancing, reading or other hobbies. The ability to adapt well to adversity and trauma can help children manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Building resilience can take many productive forms, including:

- Hanging out with friends – or making new ones. Sometimes when people are in pain, they isolate themselves, but social support can be an important resource.

- Helping others can help children feel empowered. Ask for help with a task they can master or engage them in age-appropriate volunteer work.
- Developing and sticking to routine can provide a source of comfort in good times and in hard times when so much may be unknown or out of their control.
- Teaching them the tenets of self-care and ways to practise it – eating nutritious foods, moving, resting, etc. – also helps build emotional, mental and physical strength and stamina.



Give them reasons for hope

It is important to empower children and help them remember that they have successfully handled hardships in the past and these hardships have helped them build the strength to handle new challenges, even incredibly difficult ones. Help the children in your care trust themselves to solve problems and make appropriate decisions, such as by role-playing or talking through possible scenarios, reactions and choices.

Also, try to find reasons to be optimistic. A growing body of research shows that positive thinking is connected to better health, likely because positive feelings help reduce stress. For example, consider helping the child think about positive experiences they've had as a way to remind them that good things do and will happen. Acknowledging even small signs of positive change can help nurture hope that things can get better.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

Sources

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