



Talking to kids about the war in Ukraine

Psychologists offer strategies for discussing the conflict in age-appropriate ways with children and teens

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Ukrainians are fighting valiantly against the Russian army, but with war comes uncertainty. More than a million refugees have fled the country since the invasion began and each day brings new reports of violent attacks from the air, land, and sea.

Just as many U.S. adults—even those without a personal connection to Ukraine—are feeling the stresses of war from afar ([/news/apa/2022/trauma-war-afar](https://www.apa.org/news/2022/trauma-war-afar)), children and teens are also experiencing fear, frustration, and helplessness.

Parents should listen and make themselves available to talk, assure children that they are safe, and urge compassion toward those affected by the war, said Ann Masten, PhD, a psychologist and professor at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development. They should also let kids know that it's okay to feel sad, worried, or scared.

“Worry about the war is not all bad—it means that a child has empathy,” said psychologist Mary Alvord, PhD, founder and president of Resilience Across Borders (<https://resilienceacrossborders.org/>), a nonprofit focused on enhancing childhood resilience. “As long as it's channeled into action and not bottled up, worry can even be productive.”

But with less life experience and independence than adults, young people need help navigating news about the crisis. Psychologists offer advice for helping kids manage their fears and concerns, from preschool through the teenage years.

Process your emotions first

“Children pick up cues about how to feel based on the emotional tenor of conversations with their parents,” said Dawn Huebner, PhD, a clinical psychologist and author who specializes in children and anxiety.

If you're feeling stressed, sad, or angry, it's best to work through those feelings so that you can talk calmly with your child. Parents should be aware that even infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children can pick up on anxiety in their family members, Masten said, so parents should also be careful with adult conversations that children might overhear.

Anticipate questions and be proactive

Before talking with your child, prepare yourself for questions they may ask, which will depend both on your child's age and their individual sensitivities, Masten said. For example, a young child might wonder if their parents or friends could get hurt, while a teenager might want to protest or wonder if there will be a nuclear war. Recent life experiences also matter—a child already grieving the loss of a loved one may feel increased distress.

Parents should feel confident initiating conversations about the war if a child hasn't already done so.

"Sometimes, parents assume that if their children aren't talking about events like this, that they don't know about them," said Huebner. "But that's often a false assumption."

When talking with children in elementary school or younger, start by asking what they've heard, for example: "I'm wondering if you've heard that a war started way across the world," emphasizing that the conflict is far away, but using accurate terms, such as "war."

For older children and teens, consider asking what their friends are saying about the war and how they feel about it. This helps send the message that your family talks openly about life's challenges, Huebner said.

Share information and tell children they are safe

Give kids basic, age-appropriate information about the war and talk together about safety. For preschool-age children, conversations should be concrete and low in detail, Alvord said. Say things like: "People in Ukraine are collecting food, finding shelter, and helping each other."

For elementary school children, more detail is appropriate, she said, for example: "People are leaving their homes to find bomb shelters and safe places, and depending on each other for support."

Children often wonder how these events will affect them. Reassure your child that the war is happening in a different part of the world and that they are safe.

In middle school, kids start to differentiate from their parents and voice their own ideas. "This is a good opportunity for deeper conversations about global issues, safety in the media, and how to access reliable sources of information," Masten said.

By high school, teens are old enough to understand the deadly consequences of war. They also become adept at perspective-taking, Masten said, so they might want to

discuss feelings around other kids their age fleeing their homes, taking up arms, or worrying about dying.

Discuss how the war affects your family

For families directly affected by the war, including some military families and those with relatives living in Ukraine, conversations will unfold differently. Masten recommends communicating about the uncertainty of the situation with gentle honesty, for example: “We’re doing whatever we can to figure out what’s going on, but we’re not sure yet.”

“You always want to be careful about giving blanket guarantees or reassurances,” said Huebner. “Children might want to hear that, but it doesn’t ring true, so it’s not ultimately useful.” In other words, don’t say: “Everything will be fine.” Do say: “We’re keeping in close contact. Our relatives are taking steps to stay safe.”

Focus on the helpers

Emphasizing how people are supporting Ukrainians can make kids feel safer, Huebner said. “It reminds them that even when scary or bad things happen, there are always people that step forward to help.”

Tell children that humanitarian workers, volunteers, and people from our government and other governments around the world are busy working on a solution to keep the people of Ukraine safe.

Help kids be part of the solution

“A lot of children want to help—and it’s important to provide ways for them to do so in an age-appropriate way,” Masten said.

For young children, that may simply involve drawing pictures or writing notes about peace. Elementary school kids can raise funds for reputable charities. Middle- and high-schoolers might participate in a peaceful demonstration of support for Ukraine. Families can also join together to attend a local Ukrainian vigil or send money to charitable organizations. To help provide food, water, supplies, and psychological support to the

children of Ukraine, visit [UNICEF \(https://www.unicef.org.uk/donate/donate-now-to-protect-children-in-ukraine/\)](https://www.unicef.org.uk/donate/donate-now-to-protect-children-in-ukraine/) or [Voices of Children \(https://voices.org.ua/en/\)](https://voices.org.ua/en/).

“Turn the problems into ‘what can I do?’” said Alvord. “The healthiest thing that helps people cope is action.”

Monitor media exposure

Unlike media coverage of previous wars, we now have constant, immediate access to images and videos of violence through social media and 24-hour news. Turn the TV off or change the channel when young children are in the room to avoid exposing them to distressing footage, Masten recommends.

It’s likely that teenagers are encountering some such images on social media. Ask them what they’ve seen and how they feel about it. Is there something they’d like more information about? Consider watching or reading coverage of the war together with your teen. That may include a discussion about how to distinguish reliable sources of news from misinformation.

Seek outside support

If your child needs additional help, reach out to other adults, such as school counselors, other parents, or family members, for support. Access resources that can help your child with self-regulation, such [breathing \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_qOORFmpRk\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_qOORFmpRk) and [muscle relaxation \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQVpkZACGCE\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQVpkZACGCE) exercises that you can practice together.

Finally, watch for signs that may indicate significant distress, such as sudden changes in sleeping or eating habits, irritability, or a preoccupation with violent media. In these cases, consider seeking support from your pediatrician or a child psychologist.

Further reading

[Talking to children about war \(PDF, 134KB\)](#)

<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/talking-to-children-about-war.pdf>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Terrorism and war: How to talk to children

(https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Children-About-Terrorism-And-War-087.aspx)

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

Something bad happened: A kid's guide to learning about events in the news

(<https://www.dawnhuebnerphd.com/something-bad-happened-a-kids-guide-to-learning-about-events-in-the-news/>)

Huebner, D.

Resilience in a time of war: Tips for parents and teachers of elementary school children

(/topics/resilience/kids-war)

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Resilience in a time of war: Tips for parents and teachers of middle school children

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