How to talk about Ukraine with children

Our children are constantly absorbing things they read, see, and hear and it's completely natural for them to be picking up on the situation in Ukraine and feeling anxious and asking questions about what is going on.

Children and young people have experienced an incredibly difficult two years due to the pandemic, and now they are faced with an even more uncertain world with the threat of conflict and war. It is important that we don't avoid talking to our children about what is going on, but you might want to try to moderate their exposure to constant rolling news and updates. As hostilities in Ukraine escalate, children may see and hear things about the crisis in the news, leading to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, which parents and caregivers need to address. News should come from reliable sources. Avoid exposure to a constant stream of news – be mindful of whether parents/carers have the radio or TV on all day, as children will be absorbing news without us realising it.

Children around the world might not fully understand what is happening in Ukraine and may have questions about the images, stories, and conversations they are exposed to.

Five tools and tips that adults can use to approach the conversation with children:

1. Make time and listen when your child wants to talk

Give children the space to tell you what they know, how they feel and to ask you questions. They may have formed a completely different picture of the situation than you have. Take the time to listen to what they think, and what they have seen or heard.

Give them the basics and don't avoid the conversation. Listen to their worries and provide honest answers to their questions about what is going on, don't overcomplicate your responses and try to give details at an age-appropriate level. Don't avoid answering their questions about the situation as this could promote more anxiety but keep to basic facts.

2. Tailor the conversation to the child

Be mindful of the child's age as you approach the conversation with them. Young children may not understand what conflict or war means and require an age-appropriate explanation. Be careful not to over-explain the situation or go into too much detail as this can make children unnecessarily anxious. Younger children may be satisfied just by understanding that sometimes countries fight. Older children are more likely to understand what war means but may still benefit from talking with you about the situation. In fact, older children will often be more concerned by talk of war because they tend to understand the dangers better than younger children do.

3. Validate their feelings

It is important that children feel supported in the conversation. They should not feel judged or have their concerns dismissed. When children have the chance to have an open and honest conversation about things upsetting them, it can create a sense of relief and safety.

4. Reassure them that adults all over the world are working hard to resolve this

Remind children that this is not their problem to solve. They should not feel guilty about playing, seeing their friends, and doing the things that make them happy. Stay calm when you approach the conversation. Manage your own feelings, try to deal with your own feelings of stress and distress in a way that it is managed as your children will be sensitive to your reactions.

Children often copy the sentiments of adults, so if you are uneasy about the situation, chances are your child will be uneasy as well.

Ensure they feel supported and safe – It is important to help children understand the level of threat to them and their friends and family. Explain this is happening in Ukraine, a different country and show this if necessary, using a globe or map.

5. Give them a practical way to help

Support children who want to help. Children who can help those affected by the conflict can feel like they are part of the solution. Children can create fundraisers, send letters to local decision-makers, or create drawings calling for peace.

For example, *Save the Children* has been operating in Ukraine since 2014, delivering essential humanitarian aid to children and their families. This includes supporting access to education, distributing winter kits and hygiene kits, and providing cash grants to families. Their specialists support children to overcome the mental and psychological impacts of their experiences of conflict and violence and increase their ability to cope with stress in their daily lives.

In addition

Keep a predictable routine and schedule. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity.

Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about activities and discussions at school. Teachers should know about the child's specific fears or concerns.

Children who have experienced trauma or losses may show more intense reactions.

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