

Talking to Children about the War in Ukraine: 15 Tips for Parents

By David Fassler, MD

Once again, parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of explaining war to their children. Although these are understandably difficult conversations, they are also extremely important. While there's no "right" or "wrong" way to have such discussions, there are some general concepts and suggestions that may be helpful. These include:

1. Create an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions. At the same time, it's best not to force children to talk about things unless and until they're ready.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you're "making things up". It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future.
3. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language and developmental level.
4. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
5. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings and reactions. Let them know that you think questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
6. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. It's fine to let children know that they are safe in their house or in their school. But you can't tell children when the current conflict will end or promise that there won't be another war.
7. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may ask about friends or relatives who live overseas. They may also worry about the children in Ukraine.
8. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts or feelings. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems.

9. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. Children will be very interested in how you respond to world events.
10. Let children know how you're feeling. It's OK for children to know if you are anxious or worried about world events. Children will usually pick it up anyway, and if they don't know the cause, they may think it's their fault. They may worry that they've done something wrong.
11. Don't let children watch lots of TV with violent or upsetting images.
12. Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news of war. These children may need extra support and attention.
13. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
14. Children who are preoccupied with questions about war should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional help include ongoing trouble sleeping, intrusive thoughts, images, or worries, or recurring fears about death, leaving parents or going to school. Ask your child's pediatrician, family practitioner or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.
15. Let children be children. Although many parents and teachers follow the news and the daily events with close scrutiny, many children just want to be children. They may not want to think about what's happening halfway around the world. They'd rather play ball, climb trees or go sledding.

David Fassler, M.D. is a child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, VT. He is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont, and the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy at the Vermont Center for Children, Youth and Families. He is also a member of the Consumer Issues Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (www.aacap.org).