



# Talking to Children about War

The attack on Ukraine has evoked many emotions including anger, fear, anxiety, worry, and confusion. It has also created safety concerns for the region that reach into our own country. Some families may be worried about loved ones who are directly impacted, including those who live in the area; those who were visiting and are trying to get back to the United States; or those who are deployed as part of the military, government, or a relief organization. When there are events like these in other countries, we may feel the economic impact in the United States including seeing raising gas prices, higher prices for some imported goods, and changes in the stock market. These consequences can lead to additional worries for families that were already struggling financially from the pandemic. Most children will learn about the war and its consequences through the media or social media. Caregivers and children alike may be struggling to make sense of what they are seeing and hearing. Children of all ages will be turning to trusted adults for help and guidance. Parents and caregivers can help navigate what they are seeing and hearing by having a conversation with them, acknowledging their feelings, and finding ways to cope together.

## Potential Impact and Considerations

- For some children and families, the war may serve as a reminder of their own trauma or loss. This may result in feelings of sadness, fear, and helplessness, worries about separation, increased acting out, as well as possible disruptions to their sleep, appetite, and ability to concentrate. Caregivers can provide support to children by 1) learning about common trauma reactions; 2) offering comfort and reassurance; and 3) finding opportunities for connections with family and others important in their lives. To learn more read [Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event](#).
- Military families may be experiencing an increased worry for loved ones who are or may be deployed as a result of the war or who are already stationed in the region. Although military families understand the risks associated with being in the military community, they could use additional supports to help bolster their resilience and to assist them through these challenging times. For best practices providers can read [Working Effectively with Military Families: 10 Key Concepts All Providers Should Know](#), and parents/caregivers can read [Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: For Military Parents and Caregivers](#).
- Families who have loved ones in the Ukraine, Russia, and the surrounding region may need to take extra time to discuss children's concerns related to the safety of their relatives and friends, and to acknowledge how difficult the uncertainty and worry can be for the entire family. While keeping up with events is especially important when family is involved, finding some time each day to take a break from coverage and engage in other activities is important for everyone's overall coping.

## Talking to Children about War

- **Start the Conversation**
  - Check in by asking what your children know about the situation. Most school-age children and teens will have heard something from media outlets, social media, teachers, or peers.
  - Do NOT presume you know what your children are thinking or feeling. Ask how they are feeling about what is happening in Ukraine and respond to the concerns they share. Remember, their worries and feelings may not be what you think. Validate feelings your children share.
  - Plan to have multiple conversations if they have had a lot of questions or as the situation changes. Checking back in as changes occur helps children to know you are open to talk about difficult situations.

- **Clear Up Any Misunderstandings**

- Listen and ask questions to find out if your children understand the situation accurately. They may think they are at risk when they are not.
- Different perspectives and misinformation about war is common. Family who live in the region may be getting different news stories. Clear up any misinformation your children might have heard. Discuss with older children the complexities of the political situation and the potential impacts. Discuss as a family if there are aspects of the current situation that you want to collectively support or research more about (e.g., donating to a charity, reading about the history of the region).
- The events in the Ukraine and Russia can be confusing for adults, too. Gather information from trusted news sources so that you can address your children's questions; this can increase your confidence in answering their questions as you begin the conversation. If you are not sure of an answer, that's OK. Let children know you appreciate the question and that you can work together to find the answer.

- **Provide Context**

- Younger children hearing about war may worry about their own safety. Discuss with them where the war is and reassure them that their own community is safe. Young adults and older teens may wonder about a draft or may show interest in joining the military. Address their questions and support them accordingly.
- Help children identify assumptions they may hold about others based on their nationality, place of birth, or languages spoken. Caregivers and school personnel should ensure that all children are being treated with respect.

- **Monitor Adult Conversations**

- Use caution when discussing the war in front of younger children. Children often listen when adults are unaware and may misconstrue what they hear, and filling in the blanks with more inaccuracies may increase their distress.
- Monitor the tone of your discussions, as expressing views in an angry or aggressive way may frighten young children. Be as calm as possible when discussing the war in language young children can understand.
- Monitor your expression of worries and concerns about any economic impact the war may have on your family as your anxieties may unintentionally be communicated to your children.

## Understanding Media Exposure

- Media coverage of war, combat, and its aftermath may be upsetting to children of all ages and can increase fear and anxiety.
- The more time children spend viewing coverage of the war, the more likely they are to have negative reactions. Excessive viewing may interfere with children's recovery afterwards.
- Very young children may not understand that the event is not happening in their community.
- Caregivers can help by limiting exposure to media coverage, including social media discussions of the war. This is helpful for caregivers too.
- The younger the child, the less exposure they should have. If possible, preschool children should not be watching coverage at all.
- Caregivers can support older children by viewing media together in order to answer questions or explain what they are seeing, even continuing to be open to discussion after you turn the coverage off. Check in with them about what is being discussed on social media about the war, allowing for ongoing conversations about it.

## How to Foster Resilience

- **Increase connections:** Families can benefit from spending increased time together, providing extra reassurance and hugs, and reaching out to other family or community members. For example, reach out to those in the military or those with families in the area and check how they are doing and what they need during these stressful times.
- **Emphasize the helpers:** Caregivers can support children by highlighting the many ways people are working to support those affected by war and to end the conflict.
  - If children wish to help those impacted by the war, consider ways to do so including sending letters to the troops, sending donations to responding charity organizations, supporting local refugee organizations, or participating in activities being offered by your faith, culture, or community organizations.
- **Keep to routines:** In times of stress, routines can be comforting for children and teens. As much as possible, keep to your routines and schedules in the face of current events. For those that are worried about economic hardships, discuss as a family the activities that can be done together that will not add to this burden but will still offer moments of laughter and joy.
- **Offer patience:** In times of stress, children and teens may have more challenges with their behavior, concentration, and attention. Caregivers can offer additional patience, care, and love to children and themselves, in recognition that everyone could be affected. Remember, just as you are being extra patient and caring with your children, you need to be patient and kind to yourself as we all may feel increased stress at this time.