

Mom, are we going to war?

Andrea Wiebelitz



Dear Parents,

At the moment, we're all pretty overwhelmed: having to get through two years of a pandemic with all the consequences that the measures brought with them....and this crisis is not over yet - that has cost us all an enormous amount of strength!

And now, in addition, we have to learn to deal with the shock of the political events that none of us had expected!

All of us are very affected by what is happening in Ukraine right now, we suffer with those affected and are looking for ways to help and to understand what is actually going on and why. There are no easy answers to this.

All those who have to deal with small children are particularly sensitive to this. How do we deal with them in such stressful times? How do we respond to children's questions about war?

How honestly should I answer? Should I downplay? Share in all knowledge? How do I remain authentic? What protection do children need? How do we keep our own strength to be able to manage everyday family life?

In the last two weeks, there was relatively little talk about the war in the kindergarten; there were a few remarks from some children now and then. Some remarks, however, gave rise to questions and also concerns from us educators about how much some children learn about the war and how much they are exposed to reports from the media. We have the impression that some children see and hear unfiltered news about Ukraine and that the consternation of the adults around them also has a strong overwhelming effect.

Therefore, I will try to pass on some of the thoughts from a conversation that took place in our kindergarten in a small circle with parents and also share with you my experiences that I have gained

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from working in emergency education in crisis areas and my work in the kindergarten in Lebanon. Maybe this will be helpful for the situation right now.

As much as we would like our children to grow up sheltered and carefree, it is a fact that there are conflicts, crises and wars in the world, and even when we look from the major world events to our everyday lives, we experience misunderstandings, anger, disagreements and conflicts that, depending on the state of mind of the people involved, can be quite physical, but also emotional and intellectual, or in good conversation. How to deal appropriately with conflict is a great field of practice where we all have much to learn!

Through adult conversations, in the family, while shopping, on the train, or through older siblings bringing home questions from school, etc., it may be that even children whose parents try to keep these topics away learn about the war. Even from kindergarten, things may be brought home that leave you as a parent astonished and concerned.

It can be helpful if you take the following suggestions into account in their reactions:

→ Try to remain calm!

The child should feel that he or she can tell the parents everything that moves him or her. That listening is done without interrupting or quickly ending the conversation. Show interest, ask how your child knows about it.

If smaller children are present, for whom the questions are not yet relevant, you can also postpone the conversation: "That's very important, what you're telling me, I'm very interested, I really need time for that. We'll do that later when little brother has his nap". Avoid these conversations right before bedtime, unless the child asks right then and wants to get rid of something that is bothering him.

→ Call a spade a spade!

Don't beat around the bush when your child talks about the war. Then there is little room for wild fantasies that could otherwise incriminate.

Depending on the age of the child, you can say: " Yes, that's true. There's a country where a big fight just broke out." Or, " Yes, there really is a bad war that has broken out, I'm very sad about that. Two countries are fighting over an area and a lot of things are being destroyed. Fortunately, there are a lot of people who are doing everything they can to stop the war. They talk to each other and try to find a solution to the dispute."

When doing this, avoid making sweeping judgments about " the Russians", " the Ukrainians" etc., with young children you don't even need to name countries or people responsible.

Listen to your child's question! Only answer as much as is asked. Do not pour out all your own knowledge or judgments on the child.

→ Express hope!

Even if it is difficult to see a ray of hope at the moment: convey that there are ways to end the conflict. The conflict is made by people, so it can be ended by people! And most people in the world want a peaceful co-existence!

With older children, maybe ask the question, " What would you do if you were chancellor right now? If you could determine something?" Take these suggestions seriously, don't dismiss them as naive, because mostly behind them is the great human ideal of equality, freedom and brotherhood, which children intuitively know about!

→ Become active!

Do something for others: Children can draw a picture where the world is peaceful and beautiful and give it away. They can light a candle, pray, or say a verse. You can pick out things from the children's

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room with your child that can be given away, e.g. to the refugees who arrive here with us. They can also donate, maybe an amount from their pocket money? On the one hand, this helps other people, and on the other hand, one comes out of the passive endurance of the situation into an action. This is very important in stressful situations, to experience oneself as an active person and not as a powerless one.

→ Do not watch any news broadcasts!

All images and comments about the war from the media Internet, radio, television etc. have a disturbing effect and cannot be properly understood and classified by younger children, and by that I mean children up to 12 years old. If you use this to bring the war into your living room, you need not be surprised if your child becomes afraid, sleeps badly, or shows other signs of stress, even traumatization.

→ Get help if you feel you can no longer cope with the situation!

This can be a spouse, friends, and relatives to talk to or professional help from counseling centers. There is the phenomenon of secondary traumatization, i.e., not through disasters experienced by yourself, but through reports and images! You should take this seriously.

A few days off from the media and news might be a good idea. Instead, make sure you get enough sleep, plenty of exercise in the fresh air and consciously direct your thoughts to uplifting texts, e.g., poetry, good literature or recharge your batteries with musical impressions. Find something that calms you down and does you good. Then you can continue to deal with the situation again and be stable enough to provide a safe framework for the children.

Finally, here's a little incident that a mother described to me:

She herself is very involved in the social field and immediately after the outbreak of the war had sent a package with things that are probably needed in the hardship of the flight and thereby sensibly also let her children of 8- and 5-years help. On the way to the collection point, the five-year-old then asked, "Mama, are we going to war now?"

This statement shows how close everything is to the children!

They do not yet have any concepts of distance (some of us adults also had to look first to see where all the cities in Ukraine that are reported on), of temporal processes, but are always in the midst of events, everything is immediate and present. We have to take that into account. As well as the fact that our moods and feelings are also finely perceived. For this reason alone, it is necessary to speak out honestly, but in a way that is appropriate for children, so that there is also language and words for these sensed experiences in our so challenging times!

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I wish everyone much confidence in the forces of good in every human being and in world events!

Kind regards from Andrea

Andrea Wiebelitz, born in 1965, has been a Waldorf kindergarten teacher since 1991, and did additional training in remedial education at the Freie Hochschule Mannheim. Further education at the "Der Hof" in Niederursel, "Counselling parents and learning to see children in a new way". She is a leader of parent-child groups. Emergency education in crisis areas. Supervision of the Waldorf kindergarten in Beirut, Lebanon, since 2015.