



Guidelines for Talking with Young Children about War



The world has watched the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfold on television, social media, and other outlets for the past several weeks.

Despite adults' best efforts to shield young children from this reality, they may have been exposed to this war anyway, whether through the media, siblings, friends, or overhearing adults' conversations. This can undermine children's sense of safety as well as their social and emotional well-being. While young children are not able to comprehend complicated concepts like Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine or the threats to democracy, they will undoubtedly be frightened and confused by the violent images of bombed buildings, tanks or other weapons of war, and of fleeing or injured children, as well as the deep and obvious concerns of the adults around them.

Note that wars impacting non-white populations such as the war in Syria or conflicts in Central America or Africa have not been covered as heavily by the American press. These guidelines apply to helping children with all wars and conflicts.

DEY offers guidelines for implementing an age-appropriate, meaningful, and caring approach to help young children deal with this shocking event:

- **Protect young children from exposure to news on TV, radio, social media, or hearing adults talk about it as much as possible.** The more they see and hear, the more dangerous they will think the world is.
- **Children need to know you will be there to help them and to keep them safe.** Trusted adults can help children sort out what they see and hear and help them feel safe. How you react plays a big role in determining how they think, feel, and what they learn.
- **Start by finding out what children know.** This gives you more information about their real concerns, which might be different from yours. Ask open-ended questions like, "What have you heard about that?" or "What do you know about....?"

- **Base your responses on the child's age and specific needs.** Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. When young children see or hear about something scary, they often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. Younger children tend to focus on one thing at a time. Because they don't yet have logical, causal thinking, it's hard for them to figure out the logic of what happened and why or sort out what is real and what is not.
- **Let children know that, if they have any questions about this or anything else, you are happy to talk with them about it.**
- **Answer children's specific questions, but don't elaborate.** You don't need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they want to know. Continue to reassure them about their safety.
- **Support children's effort to use play, art, and writing to work out an understanding of what they have seen and heard.** Although some adults are uncomfortable when children bring violence into their play, this helps them work out ideas and feelings and, also, shows adults what they are worried about. Provide open-ended play materials such as blocks, emergency vehicles, miniature people, and a medical kit, as well as art materials like markers and paper.
- **Be on the lookout for signs of stress.** Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, regression in toileting, frequent crying, or trouble with transitions are all signs that additional support may be needed. Protecting children from the media, maintaining routines, providing reassurance, and even extra hugs can help children regain their equilibrium.
- **Help children experience the power of solving their own conflicts without violence.** Children are often confused when we tell them to "use their words" to solve conflicts, but they see adults using violence to solve theirs. Show them how to deal with issues differently in their own lives. Help children learn by your example and interactions with them how to resolve conflicts in constructive ways.
- **Make sure children know that it is the job of adults to protect them.** Discuss what adults are doing to make the situation better, such as sending aid including money, food, medical supplies, and warm clothing to the Ukrainians and punishing the Russians by taking away things they like such as their money, McDonald's, Coca Cola, and Starbucks. Tell them than many countries like England, France, Germany, and the U.S. are working together to make sure this never happens again.