

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

How to talk to children about war and conflict

This fact sheet has been adapted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network resource, [Talking to children about war](#) and the Emerging Minds resource, [Talking to kids after terrorism and violent events](#).

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.



War and conflict can bring up a range of emotions including anger and outrage, anxiety, sorrow, fear and helplessness. You might be worried for the safety of loved ones living or working in the conflict zone or grieving the destruction of cities, towns and important cultural sites. Whether you have a personal connection to the conflict or not, you might be worried about the reactions of others in your communities and online. You may feel helpless about the injustices and brutalities of the conflict and the range of opinions about it, particularly in the comments section on social media.

It can be hard to know how to explain war and conflict to children, or if you should even talk about them at all. You may be struggling to make sense of what you're seeing, hearing and feeling yourself. It's normal to want to protect your child from the violent reality of these events, but in today's ever-connected world, it's difficult to keep all media and information from reaching them.

Many children will end up either hearing about the war or seeing news footage or images on television or online, whether intentionally or accidentally in passing. Children may feel scared, angry, confused or overwhelmed by the events of the conflict, even if they don't have a personal connection to the country or peoples involved. Depending on their age and where they're at in their development, they may not fully understand what they're seeing on TV and online, but they can pick up on the emotions of the adults around them. They will be looking to the trusted adults in their life for help, comfort and guidance.

Talking with children about their thoughts and feelings related to the event can be a healthy way to cope with any distress or worries they may have. The following tips can help you to have honest, age-appropriate conversations with your child about war and conflict.

- **Check in with yourself first.** Are you ready to talk about the situation and to answer questions openly and honestly? It's OK to let your child know that you're upset, but remaining calm and in control will help them to do the same.

It might help to identify a trusted friend, colleague or family member who you can share your thoughts, feelings and concerns with, so they're less likely to come out in your conversations with your child.

- **Try to choose a quiet moment** when there aren't many other people around and you have time to spend with your child afterwards if necessary. For younger children, this might be while you're doing an activity together; for older children, a car ride could be a good time to talk.

Ask how they're feeling and if you can have a talk with them about something important, and reassure them that they're not in trouble. If they don't want to talk, let them know that's fine and that you'll try again another time.

- **Ask your child if they've heard or seen anything about the war and what they know about it.** Let them ask whatever questions they need to and answer honestly, but without graphic or violent details. This is a chance to clear up any misinformation or disinformation your child may have heard and fill in any gaps.

Children may be worried about their own safety; explain to them where the war is and reassure them that they're safe. If you have older children, seek out reliable information sources that discuss the complexities of the political situation and the potential impacts of the conflict in balanced and unbiased ways.

If you're not sure of an answer to your child's questions, that's OK; let them know that you appreciate them asking and that you can work together to find the answer.



- **Follow your child's lead in the conversation** and monitor how they respond. It's OK to pause the conversation if they get tired or upset. You might end up having several smaller conversations over time, rather than talking about everything all at once. If they don't want to talk, don't make them, but try again another time.

- **Ask how they're feeling about what's happening.** Children will often hide their distress because they don't want to worry their parents, especially if they can see that you're having a hard time yourself. It's OK to let them know you're having a difficult time but it's important to remind them that they can always share their thoughts and feelings with you.

Accept their feelings without judgement and don't say things like, 'You shouldn't feel like that', or 'Be brave', which deny the reality of their emotions. If you have friends or family in the region, acknowledge how difficult the ongoing worry and uncertainty can be and let them know that they're not alone in their feelings.

- **Avoid negative and judgmental language.** It's natural to be angry and want to blame someone for the conflict. But children can easily pick up prejudices from the content they consume and the people around them.

Remind your child that we cannot blame an entire cultural, ethnic or religious group for the actions of their government or an extremist group. This is also a chance to discuss your beliefs and values around how others should be treated, and to help your child identify any negative assumptions they might have about other cultures or religious groups.

- **Limit their exposure to coverage of the war or conflict,** including social media posts and conversations about the conflict. Ideally, children under five shouldn't be watching coverage at all. Where possible, view content about the war or conflict together with your older children, explaining what they're seeing and answering any questions they have.

Check in regularly with your child about what they're seeing on social media and online about the war and teach them [how to spot false news and fake content online](#). If you have loved ones in the region, it may be tempting to stay glued to the news, but finding some time each day to take a break from the coverage is important for your whole family's wellbeing.

- **Discuss what to do if they experience any aggression or hate from people online, at school or in their community.** Explain to them that there may be people who don't agree with their perspective on the war, and role play how they should respond (if at all).

Make it clear that if these people become aggressive or threatening, they should go straight to you or another trusted adult for help. The eSafety Commissioner has more [information and advice for young people who are experiencing online hate](#).

- **Try to follow the conversation up with a calming, enjoyable activity, like drawing, going for a walk, watching a movie or reading a story together.** This helps build feelings of safety and connection and is a chance for your child to calm down if the conversation has brought up any feelings of sadness or fear.

- **Plan to have multiple conversations with your child about the war, as they think of more questions or as the situation changes.** Checking in with them regularly lets them know that you're open to talking about difficult things.

You might like to get together as a family to discuss any aspects of the conflict that you want to collectively support or learn more about – for example, donating to a charity or reading more about the history of the region.

- **Be careful when talking about the war in front of your child.** Children often overhear much more than adults think they do and will pick up on your emotions and tone of voice, so it's important to stay as calm as possible.

Children may misunderstand what they hear and fill in the blanks with incorrect information, so it's also important to use language that they can understand, even if you're not talking directly to them.



Talking about war and conflict isn't easy. But by having these conversations, you're giving your child a healthy and helpful way to process their thoughts and feelings and to develop empathy for others.

You might also find the following resources helpful:

- [Traumatic events, the media and your child](#) (fact sheet)
- [Talking to kids after terrorism and violent events](#) (fact sheet)
- [In focus: Understanding anxiety in children](#) (article)

AVAILABLE HERE

**More resources
on managing
anxiety in children**

