

Article

# How to talk to your children about conflict and war

*8 tips to support and comfort your children.*



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When conflict or war makes the headlines, it can cause feelings such as fear, sadness, anger and anxiety wherever you live.

*Children always look to their parents for a sense of safety and security – even more so in times of crisis.*



Here are some tips on how to approach the conversation with your child and to provide them with support and comfort.

## 1. Find out what they know and how they feel

Choose a time and place when you can bring it up naturally and your child is more likely to feel comfortable talking freely, such as during a family meal. Try to avoid talking about the topic just before bedtime.

A good starting point is to ask your child what they know and how they are feeling. Some children might know little about what is happening and not be interested in talking about it, but others might be worrying in silence. With younger children, drawing, stories and other activities may help to open up a discussion.

Kids can discover the news in many ways, so it's important to check in on what they're seeing and hearing. It's an opportunity to reassure them and potentially correct any inaccurate information they might have come across whether online, on TV, at school or from friends.

A constant stream of upsetting images and headlines can make it feel like the crisis is all around us. Younger children may not distinguish between images on screen and their own personal reality and may believe they're in immediate danger, even if the conflict is happening far away. Older children might have seen worrying things on social media and be scared about how events might escalate.

It's important not to minimize or dismiss their concerns. If they ask a question that might seem extreme to you, such as "Are we all going to die?", reassure them that is not going to happen, but also try to find out what they have heard and why they are worried about that happening. If you can understand where the worry is coming from, you are more likely to be able to reassure them.

Be sure to acknowledge their feelings and assure them that whatever they are feeling is natural. Show that you're listening by giving them your full attention and remind them that they can talk to you or another trusted adult whenever they like.



*Use age-appropriate language, watch their reactions, and be sensitive to their level of anxiety.*

## 2. Keep it calm and age-appropriate

Children have a right to know what's going on in the world, but adults also have a responsibility to keep them safe from distress. You know your child best. Use age-appropriate language, watch their reactions, and be sensitive to their level of anxiety.

It is normal if you feel sad or worried about what is happening as well. But keep in mind that kids take their emotional cues from adults, so try not to overshare any fears with your child. Speak calmly and be mindful of your body language, such as facial expressions.

As much as you can, reassure your children that they are safe from any danger. Remind them that many people are working hard around the world to stop the conflict and find peace.

Remember that it's OK to not have the answer to every question. You can say that you need to look it up or use it as an opportunity with older children to find the answers together. Use websites of reputable news organizations or international organizations like [UNICEF](#) and the [UN](#). Explain that some information online isn't accurate and the importance of finding reliable sources.

## 3. Spread compassion, not stigma

Conflict can often bring with it prejudice and discrimination, whether against a people or country. When talking to your children, avoid labels like "bad people" or "evil" and instead use it as an opportunity to encourage compassion, such as for the families forced to flee their homes.

Even if a conflict is happening in a distant country, it can fuel discrimination on your doorstep. Check that your children are not experiencing or contributing to bullying. If they have been called names or bullied at school, encourage them to tell you or an adult whom they trust.

Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe at school and in society. Bullying and discrimination is always wrong and we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.



*The sense of doing something, no matter how small, can often bring great comfort.*

## 4. Focus on the helpers

It's important for children to know that people are helping each other with acts of courage and kindness. Find positive stories, such as the first responders assisting people, or young people calling for peace.

See if your child would like to participate in taking positive action. Perhaps they could draw a poster or write a poem for peace, or maybe you could participate in a local fundraiser or join a petition. The sense of doing something, no matter how small, can often bring great comfort.

>> Explore: [Poems for peace by children around the world](#)

## 5. Close conversations with care

As you end your conversation, it's important to make sure that you are not leaving your child in a state of distress. Try to assess their level of anxiety by watching their body language, considering whether they're using their usual tone of voice and watching their breathing.

Remind them that you care and that you're there to listen and support whenever they're feeling worried.

>> Read: [How to recognize signs of distress in children](#)

## 6. Continue to check in

As news of the conflict continues, you should continue to check in with your child to see how they're doing. How are they feeling? Do they have any new questions or things they would like to talk about with you?

If your child seems worried or anxious about what's happening, keep an eye out for any changes in how they behave or feel, such as stomachaches, headaches, nightmares or difficulties sleeping.



Children have different reactions to adverse events and some signs of distress might

not be so obvious. Younger children may become clingier than usual, while teens might show intense grief or anger. Many of these reactions only last for a short time and are normal reactions to stressful events. If these reactions last for a prolonged period of time, your child may need specialist support.

You can help them reduce stress through doing activities like belly breathing together:

- Take 5 deep breaths, spend 5 seconds breathing in and 5 seconds breathing out, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Explain that when your child inhales, they are blowing up their tummy softly like a balloon, and when they exhale the air is going slowly out of the balloon again.

Be ready to talk to your child if they ever bring up the subject. If it's just before bedtime, finish up with something positive such as reading a favourite story to help them to sleep well.

>> Read: [How to recognize signs of distress in children](#)

>> Read: [Activities to reduce stress and support your and your child's well-being](#)

## 7. Limit the flood of news

Be mindful of how exposed your children are to the news while it's full of alarming headlines and upsetting images. Consider switching off the news around younger children. With older children, you could use it as an opportunity to discuss how much time they spend consuming news and what news sources they trust. Also consider how you talk about the conflict with other adults if your children are within hearing distance.

As much as possible, try to create positive distractions like playing a game or going for a walk together.

## 8. Take care of yourself

You'll be able to help your kids better if you're coping, too. Children will pick up on your own response to the news, so it helps them to know that you are calm and in control.



If you're feeling anxious or upset, take time for yourself and reach out to other family,

friends and trusted people. Be mindful of how you're consuming news: Try identifying key times during the day to check in on what is happening rather than constantly being online. As much as you are able, make some time to do things that help you relax and recuperate.

>> Read: [Activities to reduce stress and support your and your child's well-being](#)

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