

Talking to Children About War

With news of the war in Ukraine dominating headlines, social media platforms and conversations across the country, many children in early learning and care and school age childcare settings will have been exposed to information about the conflict.

Children do not always talk about what is worrying them but they may be trying to make sense of this information by themselves and, in the absence of factual information, imagining situations to be far worse than they are. Every child is different, however, and while some might be feeling scared, others may not be worried at all.

Below are some strategies for talking to children about the current situation that will help to ease their concerns.

Keep calm. Check in with yourself and how are you currently feeling. When you are feeling anxious, children can notice this and begin to feel stressed too. If needed, take some time to calm.

Talk to children. We instinctively want to protect children from things that might frighten them; however not talking about something can make children more scared. If children are already talking about the war, encourage them to tell you what they have heard and ask them how they are feeling. If children are showing no interest, leave them be.

Answer questions. Answer children's questions in language they will understand with a level of information appropriate to their age. Avoid sharing too much information as this can be overwhelming. If you do not have all the answers, that is ok. Tell the child you will let them know when you know.

Create a safe environment. Children need to feel safe and secure. Limit children's exposure to news reports and discuss your own worries outside of children's earshot.

Reassure them. Young children often personalise situations and may perceive the danger to be closer to home. Let them know that although war is very serious, they do not need to worry about it happening in their neighbourhood. Tell them you understand how they are feeling and reassure them that they are safe and that you are there to take care of them. It is important, however, to be realistic and not to promise that no one will get hurt.

Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts or feelings but can be supported to make sense of the world through play.

Do something positive. Encourage children to engage in activities where they can feel helpful such as drawing pictures to send to children who are living in affected areas.

Avoid stereotyping groups of people by nationality and challenge hateful talk.

Partner with parents. Share information on the discussions children are having at home and in the setting or any fears or concerns the child may have.

Children who have experienced trauma or loss may be particularly vulnerable to news of war and conflict and may need extra support. Children with relatives in the regions impacted by conflict will also need special attention.

