

## How to Talk to Children and Adolescents About War



Parents and caregivers want to protect their children when faced with threat. Often, when children are confronted with upsetting sights, sounds, or content, parents engage in avoidance, hiding or protecting their children from whatever may be upsetting to them. It is understandable because it hurts adults to see children in pain. Parents and caregivers often do what it takes to lessen or remove the source of upset in the quickest way possible.

Unfortunately, avoidance is not a helpful long-term solution to protect youth. At some point, children or adolescents will witness or experience a troubling event or come across information they find upsetting or shocking. Even though it may be tempting to continue to use avoidance, it is important to help your child or teen learn how to cope.



## How to Talk to Children About War, Trauma, or Other Challenging Topics

### 1. Talk, Talk, Talk

Talking with your children about challenging topics helps them work through thoughts and feelings they may find confusing. Parents sometimes forget that children may be experiencing these situations for the first time. Children may need assistance with basic concepts, such as naming what feeling(s) they are experiencing, understanding why they are thinking about the situation so much, and why they need to ask if what they are feeling is normal.

### 2. Avoid Avoidance

We know that “opening up” and expressing oneself in relation to stressful thoughts and feelings can lead to improved physical and mental health. Children can open up by talking about the situation with friends or loved ones, writing about it, or drawing pictures of their upsetting thoughts and memories that they can share with others. By avoiding talking about it or attempting to ignore it, children may think it’s “not okay” to talk about their concerns. They also may become afraid to ask questions they have or think that it’s normal to feel nothing in response to very upsetting events.

### 3. Monitor and Educate

Children today get news from a wide variety of sources, and unfortunately, much of this can be false. In an age where misinformation can sometimes feel more like the norm, it is vital to help children know where to look for trusted information. Help your child distinguish between what is an opinion and what are facts.

Larger news organizations (e.g., CBC, New York Times, BBC) may lean in a particular direction but tend to fact-check and cite sources. In contrast, posts to social media sites or blogs can often be opinion pieces that may seem compelling but actually contain little or no factual information. Talk about obtaining information from multiple sources and how social media can be both helpful and unhelpful.

Help your children understand that sometimes what looks like a balanced reporting of facts is instead one-sided and in favour of one belief or another depending on the source of information. Whenever possible, encourage your children to always go to the original source of information rather than accepting a re-post or sharing of information as being the truth.

#### 4. **Be honest, but age-appropriate**

It can be hard to know how much to say and what to say, especially with younger children. Adolescents vary in how much attention they pay to world events – it is normal for many teens to be more focused on themselves and their close friend group compared to people they don't know. On the other hand, some children may have questions or fears about how frightening events may impact them, their family, and their future. Try to provide open, honest, and factual answers; they will likely be forming their own opinions about what is happening around them. Very young children (preschool-aged or similar) may require an analogy or story to help them understand the situation.

You may find it helpful to keep your answers brief and simple – for example, “This is what happens when one country hurts another country” – and children may struggle to understand why this occurs. It's important for parents to know they can say “I don't know” in these situations, especially when answers aren't clear even to adults.

With younger children, providing too much information or exposing them to too much content can lead to an increase in anxiety, so err on the side of less information. If your children have more questions, let them know they can ask you additional questions at any time. However, be careful to not provide the same information over and over – it is a sign that your child may be worried and asking for answers that may not be available (e.g., “Will everything be okay?” or “Why did this happen?”). An appropriate answer might be, “I'm worried too, but we should focus on what we can control and not let our worried thoughts take over.”

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