

BODY & SOUL

How to talk to your children about war

Leading parenting experts tell Anna Maxted what you should say about Ukraine



Professor Tanya Byron
DAVID BEBBER FOR THE TIMES

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How do we explain the war in Ukraine to our children? If they're seeing brutal images of war on TV and social media, listening to what friends say at school, it's likely that they'll feel concerned, anxious and distressed. The chartered clinical psychologist Professor Tanya Byron, who specialises in working with children and adolescents, says we should see their reaction in the context of the past two years.

"The pandemic was a very uncertain time, which affected children an awful lot," she says. "War is the ultimate in uncertainty and it's important to think about how children might make links between the two. 'Does the situation in the Ukraine mean that schools will close down again? Will I be forced to stop seeing my friends again?' The world can seem very unsafe at the moment."

How can we help them to try to make sense of it? Here, leading experts explain how we can talk to children of all ages about the war.

Children of all ages take their parents' lead

Our expression and our body language as well as our words betray our anxiety level, so we need to manage our own emotions. "Our job is to be calm, not distracted, and in control," Byron says. "If we are calm and in control, our children will take our lead."

Managing our anxiety is important, adds Dr Angharad Rudkin, a clinical psychologist and co-author of *Split Survival Kit*, because in this situation our child looks to us like a nervous flyer to the cabin crew. "You become hypervigilant of the air stewards. If they look OK then you feel OK. But as soon as they start looking anxious, your anxiety can increase."

How can we explain things to primary school-age kids?

The chances are, through school, friends or the car radio, children will have realised something is going on, says Rudkin – but if they haven't, don't mention it. "If you've got a seven-year-old who doesn't know about Russia and Ukraine, I'd leave it at that. Only talk about it if they bring it up." If they do bring it up? Byron says: "For very little children, don't say too much, but you can explain to them that it is not OK to take something that doesn't belong to you, and it is very upsetting for people when somebody tries to do that."

Dr Shadi Shahnavaz, the head of family therapy at the Soke private wellness clinic, suggests explaining that this is about one man, and if small children ask why he's doing this, "You could say, 'He's very angry because he feels Ukraine should belong to Russia – it used to be in the Soviet Union – and it's as if he wants to take a toy back.'" A helpful comparison, she says, is that the other countries are like teachers and other adults saying: "No, you can't take the toy back, let's find another solution."

Being honest will help your child (of any age) feel more secure

Don't avoid the conversation. Shahnavaz says: "I've seen a lot of parents say, 'Let's talk about nice things, let's not talk about that for now.' It creates anxiety in a child because then it becomes something so terrible you can't even talk about it." Give as little or much detail as is age-appropriate but don't brush it off. "Parents say, 'Oh, it's just a little argument between two countries, it's nothing!' Children won't buy that. They hear it all over the place – people are talking about war. So it is something."

Particularly in uncertain times, a secure, trusting relationship with you helps children to feel safe, says Dr Jane Gilmour, consultant clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital and co-author of *How to Have Incredible Conversations with Your Child*. If you lie to them, "It could harm your relationship and their sense of stability. Be honest. Acknowledge this is a serious event – but the countries are working together to work out what to do. You're not minimising the seriousness of it, you're also telegraphing calm. Children, whether 2 or 22, look to adults as to how they should consider danger in the world."



Don't brush off questions, no matter how difficult.
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Ask children what they've heard, to build the conversation

What if a child expresses a fear? Byron says: “Whenever they ask you a question, say, ‘What have you heard?’ This way you can make sure you know what’s behind what they are asking, what is giving them these fears.” Ask what their understanding is, Rudkin adds. “Ask, ‘What do you think is going on?’ Then you can build your conversation from their understanding.” You might also ask, “What do you want to know?” says Gilmour. But keep the first conversation short. If they want, you can talk about this daily (but not endlessly, which can increase anxiety) — but don’t overwhelm them.

With older children, Byron suggests finding suitable material to watch together, “whether documentaries or the news — then use those as starting points for discussion”.

Be the gatekeeper of news at home with primary-age children (and sensitive teenagers)

With younger children, it's best not to leave newspapers lying around, Byron says — “Some can use very distressing images.” And watch what you say in their presence. “Be careful about them overhearing your conversations as they will absorb it, but not necessarily absorb the correct information.” Too often we think children ignore Radio 4 or our TV news — wrong, Shahnavaaz says. “When you pick them up from school, you could turn your radio off or to a station that only plays music. A lot of parents think, ‘My child doesn't listen.’ They listen. They're very aware. Make sure the TV isn't on all the time.”

Most of our news is designed for an adult audience, notes Rudkin, and what children see can be particularly upsetting. “Children tend to be quite visual, so when they see an image it's very hard for them to unsee it. They're being exposed to real adult material, which is not helpful. I would turn off the news when pre-teen kids are around — and if you've got an anxious teen, even then.” But, if it is on and they're listening, discuss it, Shahnavaaz says. “How did you understand what was just said? What are your feelings about it? OK, so you're anxious — let's talk about that. What do you fear the most?”

Keep an eye out for misinformation

Gilmour says: “Teenagers are wired to find things out for themselves, so they may be more inclined to look to other sources.” Byron suggests we check in daily with them. “We need to check the reliability of their sources. Make sure that you point them to BBC News and other reliable sources of information. Make sure that they know that they can tell you what they have seen or read without getting into trouble.” If you can, Gilmour says, “ask your teen to talk it through with you”.

But what if you suspect your child is brooding but isn't talking? If your child internalises worries, Byron suggests a time each day where you talk as a family, say, at supper. “Say, ‘Has anyone mentioned anything that is happening in the world at the moment? How does it make you feel?’ ”

Never say 'Don't worry'

What if your child is upset or scared by what they've seen? Byron says: "Validate their feelings, normalise their feelings. Tell them that everyone gets nervous and everyone gets scared. Never, ever say, 'Don't worry.'" And if younger children share feelings about anxieties, she says, "Get them to name their feelings and where the feelings are. Are they in their tummy, or going around their head?" Encourage them to be specific, Gilmour adds. "You can't address the worry until you know what it is."

What do you say if your teen is convinced of impending nuclear war?

What if your child is worrying about Putin putting his nuclear forces on high alert? No question, however difficult or controversial, should be off limits, says Gilmour. Your motto should be "I'm glad you told me whatever you told me," she says. See every question as an opportunity. "Our job is to offer them a sorting space. So don't shut them down. Listening to what they're saying is not the same as agreeing with what they're saying. Allow them to talk through their concerns."

So how to answer? Shahnavaaz says: "You can acknowledge their worry by saying 'I understand it's worrying.' As to the nuclear threat you could say: 'Putin has said that, but his country would be the first to be destroyed if he did, so he would never take that risk, I don't think.'" You could also say, "I don't think other countries wouldn't allow him to take that risk."

It's OK not to have all the answers

It's worth bearing in mind that many children — though obviously not all — have developed resilience over the past two years. Shahnavaaz says, “Children live with a lot of uncertainty in their lives in general, and we can't always reassure them about everything. We can try to give them as many answers as possible, but sometimes we don't have the answers — and that's OK.” You might tell them, “It's OK to not know what's going on behind the scenes.”

Stop older children from doom scrolling — suggest practical ways to help instead

One 17-year-old saw footage of burnt bodies and other horrors on Snapchat and TikTok, but told his mother he felt it was his duty to bear witness. Shahnavaaz suggests you say: “I completely understand, you're very caring, you want to understand how these people are affected — but I think we have understood that now.” Then you say: “Now we need to think productively about this. Now let's think about how we can help them.”

Byron agrees: “If older children are worried, doing something can help.” You could help your child to find a suitable charity to donate to or raise money for. The Red Cross has launched a Ukraine crisis appeal, for example. And whether they're obsessively reading news, social media or watching TV, she says, “Tell them that it is OK to take a break from thinking about it, because thinking about difficult things like this can make us tired and unable to cope.” Teaching our children how to use their breath to calm themselves, even how to meditate, can be invaluable.

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