

COUNSELING DEPARTMENT

How to Talk with Your Child About the War in Ukraine



The early months of 2022 have already included several distressing world events. From the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19 restrictions and protests, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine — there has been a lot to weigh on the hearts and minds of individuals and families around the world. These events have presented parents with many emotional struggles including how to discuss these events while supporting their children’s ability to process what is going on around them.

If you are a parent, guardian, teacher or educator, you may ask yourself: Should I talk to kids about stressful world events? In these times, it can be hard to know whether to discuss these issues with our children, and if we do, how should we go about doing it?

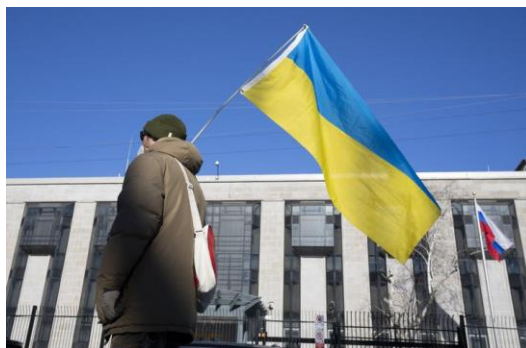
As world challenges and crises continue to make the nightly news, we need to have a plan for how to have open and honest discussions with our kids so they can grow up as informed and resilient human beings. Below are some ideas for engaging in conversations about the Ukraine invasion with your kids, and how to tailor those discussions based on age and developmental level.

3 reasons to talk to kids about the war in Ukraine

- 1. To help children process difficult emotions that may surface due to what they hear and see.** Although it might seem like a good idea to avoid an in-depth discussion to decrease any anxiety or alarm, research indicates that having a supportive discussion about a stressful event can actually decrease distress. Through safe discussions with parents, children can ask questions and be put at ease. Children left to their own

questions and worries can have those thoughts snowball into “what if’s” and catastrophic thinking. Children in families who talk about a scary event perceive less anxiety related to the stressor. Having these conversations provides you with the opportunity to help your child make sense of how they might be feeling and to provide reassurance.

- 2. To combat misinformation.** In this age of increased access to news and media, children and teens have likely been exposed to information — pictures, video clips or news footage — about the invasion of Ukraine. It is critical for parents and educators to keep children informed of Ukraine invasion based on reliable information from reputable sources, and to provide opportunities for children to ask questions. This also provides an opportunity for parents to clear up any misinformation that children may hear from their peers. Right now, many children have mentioned the fear of this invasion leading to World War III. Parents can address this with a discussion over how our country is keeping safe while showing support for the Ukraine people during their time of need. It is important to express that we take things day by day rather than live our lives with “what if’s” and catastrophic worries.
- 3. To model and encourage compassionate views towards others.** Talking to children about the war in Ukraine can model a compassionate view towards fellow human beings, regardless of distance or circumstance. Last week, Pine Valley Elementary School was asked to make cards for Ukrainian refugee children to help show support and lift spirits. Many organizations have been collecting money, clothing, food, and toiletry items for refugee families. Asking an older child a question such as “what might a person in this situation be feeling right now?” can support the growth of an empathic view of other’s lives. Empathy is a powerful thing to teach and reinforce in children.



Conversations with children under the age of five

Children of different ages and maturity will have various levels of understanding and capacity for processing the information unfolding in Ukraine. Children under the age of five may have a limited understanding of the conflict in Ukraine. If your young child asks you a question about what is happening, you can provide them with simple information they can relate to. Avoid providing more details than requested or necessary.

For children of all ages, we also recommend being mindful of exposure to news and media, especially violent or destructive content. This is particularly important for young children who have a more limited ability to understand what is happening. It is also important to minimize what young children overhear of adult conversations.

Conversations with school-aged children and adolescents

Start by asking your child what they have heard or what they might know about the conflict in Ukraine. Next, validate and normalize how they are feeling. If they say it is distressing for them, you can say: “It can be scary to think about a war; most kids and adults feel scared too.” If your child does not know very much or does not seem to be upset about what is happening, you can keep the discussion brief.

Regardless of whether they are distressed or not, you can share some factual and developmentally appropriate information. For example, you might look at a map of the world together and share where the conflict is occurring and why. You can share some basic information about what is happening and historical information that may parallel what they have learned in social studies or global studies class.

Our children are not the first generation of children to grow up with wars and distressing world events. What is new is how this generation of young people are accessing and consuming news and world events. This is a great time to differentiate what is in their control and what is out of their control. Help them focus on what they can ultimately control and change regarding stressful events happening around them. It is important for children to be informed and reassured by the adults they trust, and to be provided with opportunities to make sense of how they might be feeling as distressing world events unfold.