



Talking about war with children

What children need and what parents should know

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What seemed unthinkable for a long time has sadly caught up with us in the form of a harsh new reality: After many years of peace, Europe has once more become the scene of a horrific war. With Russia's aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law, we were abruptly forced to realize that even in the 21st century, law and democracy will have to be defended. Worse still, the war is causing millions of people to suffer and their suffering touches all of us. The images of military clashes, destruction, flight, dead and wounded people reach us daily through the media. In the very living room of a family these reports can raise questions to which even we adults often lack answers.

We can attempt to shield our children from alarming topics such as war, flight, military armament and changing threat situations because we suppose it will protect them but this will not necessarily work. These topics may already be items of discussion among your child's friends, in daycare, school or the media. Equally, it is hard to avoid your child getting an accidental glimpse of images or overhearing a conversation. Even if adults do avoid talking about this conflict in front of their child, emotions are hard to conceal. Particularly with regard

to such distressing topics, it is worth remembering that children do not have the necessary background information to be able to fully understand such impressions. In addition, younger children may not yet have the vocabulary to express themselves on this topic.

It is therefore all the more important to take their questions and their distress seriously and to address them. For children before school age, it can be useful to name and explain the associated feelings.

Often, children only have a very rudimentary knowledge on a topic. It is therefore helpful to begin a conversation by finding out how much they already know. It is sensible to limit any further explanations on the violent news reports to all but the most important facts. To comprehend a situation, children do in no way need adults to tell them all the sober facts at once. Depending on their age, children may not yet be able to grasp facts in their entirety. Rather, it is important to concisely present the necessary information to them in an objective manner. They only have to learn the facts that they absolutely need to understand and judge a situation.

When talking to children, in nearly every case parents can go by the following principle: Not everything has to be said, but everything that is being said should be true. It is helpful to know that with appropriate support children can deal with stressful topics. A well-informed and approachable dialog partner (who



does not have to be a parent) can demystify the distressing situation. Without adult guidance, children might use their creativity to come up with their own explanations when faced with hazy ideas and unfamiliar topics. In this way, they might actually end up with explanations that are even more frightening than the truth. In contrast, an open and honest approach makes it easier for children to talk about

difficult issues. Avoidance by keeping a topic secret, on the other hand, makes children feel insecure and often stirs up unnecessary fears, as children mentally construct explanations that often have very little resemblance with reality. When parents approach difficult issues openly, their child will also learn to do so. The attitude of caregivers, especially of parents, can influence children's behavior strongly, both positively and negatively. A parent's fear, for instance, increases their child's insecurity. It is therefore important to stay calm as much as possible, to make children feel safe. This does not mean that an adult's worries have to be stuffed into the closet, but can be expressed honestly.

Especially in times of crisis, it helps children and adolescents to stick to their everyday routines. Attending daycare and school regularly, meeting friends, pursuing hobbies and leisure activities become particularly important at such times.

Important in this regard

Children from ages 0 to 6

- Infants, toddlers and kindergarten children sense moods and tensions within the family. They react with vulnerability, confusion and stress.
- They become focussed on their immediate caregivers, may be unsettled and waiting for their reactions.

Children from ages 6 to 12

- At this age, children begin to explore social issues. Be sure to take their questions seriously and respond to them.
- School children can react very differently to stressful issues. Try to get talking to your child in order to get an impression of their feelings.

Adolescents from age 12 and older

- How teenagers deal with stressful images can also vary greatly. A seeming disinterest does not necessarily mean a real disinterest. It can help if a parent from time to time signals their readiness to talk.
- This age group is more likely to discuss fears and worries with friends or peers than with their parents. This makes it all the more important to keep making unobtrusive offers to talk and to be open to reactions.

5 TIPS

1. Take your child's feelings seriously and respond to them.
2. When responding to a child's questions: You do not have to tell your child everything, but what you do say should be true.
3. Talk to your child in age-appropriate language about your own worries and fears without overwhelming them. Children are very sensitive and notice when something is bothering you.
4. Maintain daily routines and convey confidence and calmness in order to make your child feel secure.
5. Avoid unnecessarily confronting your child with dramatic images of war (e.g. TV news, newspaper, films, cell phone, etc.)

War in the media

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Children very matter-of-factly start using media such as the internet, radio and TV at an ever younger age. This can, however, also confront them with images for which they are not ready and which might cause them emotional stress. The same applies to print media such as daily newspapers or magazines. It is true that especially younger children cannot yet read their texts. They can, however, see what is depicted and those images are not always suited for the likes of children - especially when it comes to reports from war zones.

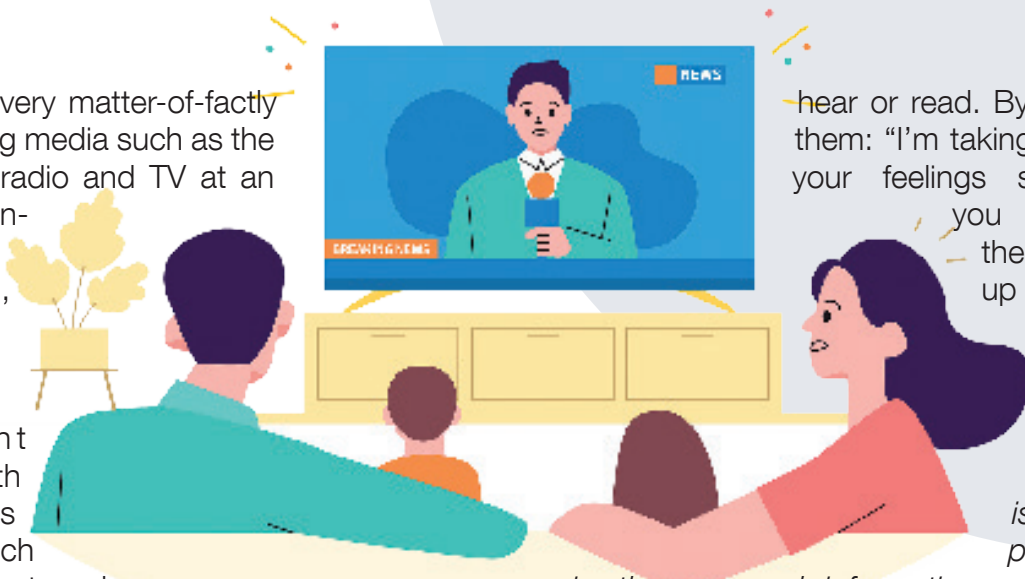
For kindergarten and elementary school children

It is especially the overwhelming wave of images that is not suited to their developmental level. Since they can neither understand these images nor put them into perspective, they can quickly become distressed.

Smaller children might find it hard to express themselves. A lot is processed via images and on the emotional level. It can therefore be helpful to gain an insight into the emotional situation of your child by playing, drawing or painting with them.

For older school age children and teenagers

the use of various media is normal. They make use of them to talk to peers, but also to get information on current affairs. However "grown-up" they might otherwise appear, older children cannot always process everything they



hear or read. By showing them: "I'm taking you and your feelings seriously", you can help them open up to you.

When talking to older children, is not important to

give them as much information as possible or to show them that you are informed about everything, but rather to stay authentic.

It is not always possible to find an answer to every question instantly. Older children can handle it well if parents take a little time before they can give an answer.

It is therefore good to read or watch selected news items together to give you the chance to

- convey closeness and security,
- to answer arising questions promptly and
- to respond to your child's distress immediately.

Be aware that such reports can also trigger you to have negative emotions. These are difficult to suppress and children are very sensitive to the underlying moods of their parents.

However, by talking to your child about your own negative emotions in an age-appropriate language, you can encourage them to show their own feelings

General book recommendations

Wie ist es, wenn es Krieg gibt?
Alles über Konflikte.

Wie ist es, wenn man kein Zuhause hat?
Alles über Flucht und Migration.



Gabriel Verlag

Further information is available under the following links

- www.kindersache.de (aid organization specialized on children and their questions)
- www.nummergegenkummer.de (krieg-in-europa-wir-sind-da-und-hoeren-zu) - phone counseling hotline
- www.ku.de/forschung/forschungsinfrastruktur/forschende-institutionen/zentralinstitut-fuer-ehe-und-familie-in-der-gesellschaft/publikationen/workingpapers (anxieties of children of soldiers)
- www.ku.de/zfg (Center for Marriage and Family in Society)

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