



Hillstone Primary School

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How to talk to children about what's happening in Ukraine

As news of Russia's invasion of Ukraine escalates, so do anxieties around the situation.

Hundreds of Ukrainians are feared to have lost their lives, Boris Johnson has spoken of a 'tidal wave of violence' and Putin has warned other world leaders that they 'will face consequences greater than any in history' if they intervene.

For those caught up in the violence and attacks, it's unimaginable – and for those looking on from afar, the feelings of fear and helplessness can be overwhelming.

For children, who have less of an idea of what is going on, this can be even more terrifying.

Hearing words like 'bombing', 'invasion' and 'World War III' being thrown about, without a full understanding of what's going on, is worrisome for us all, and it doesn't escape our little ones.

'Children are like sponges; they're absorbing everything,' explains multi-award winning **hypnotherapist, psychotherapist and mentor, Tania Taylor.**

'Whether on the news, someone talking to the shop checkout lady, parents chatting in the playground, or the latest TikTok video, much of what they are hearing, especially once at school, is out of your control.

'And sometimes, external factors (for example, Kevin in the playground telling everyone that World War III is starting and we're all going to die) can provoke more of a fear response.'

It's very possible that even very young children are more aware of what war is than we realise.



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'Many children have been exposed to adults or older siblings playing war-type computer games or watching YouTube influencers play such games on theirs or a friend's mobile phone or tablet,' Tania says.

'So,' she continues, 'words like "bombing" and "invasion" may not be as unfamiliar to our children as we might assume.'

Therefore, it's worth considering your language around younger children.

But how is it best to explain what's going on to the children in your life? And how can you go about reassuring any anxieties (while also managing your own)?

How to approach the subject

As parents and carers we can feel like what we should be giving them all of the facts and keeping them informed. But this approach can sometimes leave children feeling overwhelmed, Tania explains.

'Children tend to be really good at spontaneous questioning. If they want to know something, they'll ask,' she says.

But if they do ask, or you feel that they need some explanation or reassurance, it's important to think about how you're feeling first.

Tania recommends: 'First of all, you need to consider your own state of mind in relation to what is going on and how much information you would personally like to give your child.'

'This is important as even if you are led by your child's questioning, you begin with at least some self-awareness of how you are feeling and where you want to go with it.'

'If you are particularly anxious about it all, it may be that you choose to wait until a time when you're feeling less anxious to talk about it. Or perhaps have a discussion with another important adult in your child's life, who can talk to your child instead, like a teacher or grandparent.'



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Tania suggests that you may want to start with a non-specific question, like 'have you learned about wars at school?', and then listen to your child's response.

'What you're doing here is enabling your child an opportunity to talk about something which they may not realise they can talk about,' she notes.

'If your child isn't interested, they'll tell you so, and there's no need to push the conversation. If they go on to hear something at school, they'll know you know about it and be more likely to approach you with any questions.'

It's always a good idea to let children know that, if they have any questions, they can ask you.

What can parents do and say to explain but not frighten?

Talking about the distance between the UK and ongoing events can be helpful, suggests Tania.

'As much as we don't want to normalise war, it is something that has been happening at varying points across the globe for the whole of your child's life,' she explains.

'Knowing this can help to reassure your child that the chance they will be directly impacted is quite minimal.

'Although, they may want to talk to you about the people that are directly impacted. Keep language age appropriate and be led by your child.

'Taking action, such as getting in touch with a charity organisation that may accept shoebox-type gifts, is a really good way of showing your child that although this is happening far away, there are still small actions we can take to give our support.'



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Active listening

Tania also recommends a technique called 'active listening', which you can use if your child is interested and wants to know more.

'What you are doing here is paying full attention to your child during the whole conversation, ignoring distractions, and putting all your focus on listening to your child's words,' she tells us.

'Listen to what they're asking, and don't give more information than they are asking for. We humans have a habit of oversharing, this is a situation when that's not necessarily helpful.'

And if you don't know all the answers to their questions, don't be afraid to say you don't know.

Tania adds: 'Perhaps you can spend time searching for information together, or maybe you feel more comfortable saying you'll find out and let them know later on.'

How to talk to kids of different age groups

News like this can be scary to children if not handled in the right way, and it will be different for different ages, explains **Kirsty Ketley** – a qualified early years and parenting consultant.

'There is no 'one way' approach, as all children are different, but it is important that the subject is treated with sensitivity and understanding of what children need to know, weighed against what they are hearing from other sources,' she tells us.

'Children of all ages will also feel more worried when they think that no one is willing to talk about things that are worrying to them – they will think that it is too scary or upsetting to talk about, which then adds to their worries.'



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1. Under seven

'I think it is unlikely for this age group to properly pick up on what is going on,' says Kirsty.

'But, if they do overhear your conversations or see the news and ask questions, it is important to make sure they know they are safe and that what is happening is not in our country – perhaps showing them on a map or globe, so they can grasp the distance.

'Kids of this age don't need to be burdened with news that they are unable to understand, so if they don't mention it, don't bring it up. Let them be blissfully unaware.'

Jacqui O'Connell is a Youth Leader and Co-founder of the charity **Spiritus**, supporting home-schooled children in West London.

She says: 'For younger children, we recommend reading a book about general worries and how to deal with them, such as **Scared and Worried by psychiatrist James J Crist, PhD**. You can then apply this to their worries about the situation with Ukraine and Russia.

'Age-appropriate books on worries can help us discuss concerns and support children without too much detail.'

2. Tweens (between eight and 12)

'Tweens are at an impressionable age and are more aware of the world around them,' says Kirsty.

'They will have learned about war and conflict in history lessons at school, and so they will have preconceived ideas of what it is all about.

She recommends watching something like Newsround, aimed towards 6-12 years olds, which explains things in an appropriate way. 'If you are worried how to go about things, watch it with your child and then have a discussion about what you have watched.'

Another key to talking to children between the ages of 7-12 yrs is also how we question them.



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'Keep it positive,' says educational expert and founder of **KidCoachApp** Kavin Wadhar.

'Don't ask why they are worried. Children often struggle to understand their emotions, which can lead to further anxiety. Instead, ask them questions to help them work out solutions to their worries.'

'It is also crucial for parents to be aware of how they discuss the Ukraine and Russia situation with other adults around children or in earshot.'

'Children are susceptible to how parents respond to issues, which can have a massive impact on a child's anxieties. Studies have shown that children from as young as one to two years old will mimic parents' behaviour.'

3. Teens (12 and above)

Kirsty suggests asking them what they already know and giving them lots of reassurance if they are worried.

'Let them know that you are there to talk through things,' she says.

'I think it is important that they know that what they are seeing on social media, won't all be accurate and suggest that they watch the news or read reliable news sources online, instead.'

For teenagers, it is important to research the issues between Russia and Ukraine, look at the history of wars in Europe, and discuss why we have wars,' support worker and joint founder of **Spiritus, Gemma Eni Cherish**, says.

'Group discussions to give everyone a chance to share their point of view after exploring what is happening and why – helps to ease concerns.'

'It also helps support children to find their confidence as we suggest they develop ways to deal with anxieties. They build trust and confidence by sharing, and we all learn how to support each other.'



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