Five Tips for Talking with Your Children about War and Conflict

When war and conflict make the headlines and children see disturbing images on television or the internet, it can create feelings of fear, stress, sadness, anxiety, and even anger. They may also hear things from friends, teachers, and other children and adults about what is happening in the world, including frightening possibilities about what could happen.

One of the most important roles a parent plays in their child’s life is to keep them safe and secure, especially in times of turmoil. Here are five tips for talking with children about war and conflict and how to provide support to ease their fears.

1. **Find out what their concerns are, what they have heard from others, and how it makes them feel.** Find a comfortable time, such as during a family meal, when you can ask them what
they know and how they are feeling. Try to avoid a discussion right before bedtime, as it can create more worry and make sleeping difficult.

Be open to how much or how little children want to share, and pay close attention to their emotions. Some children may know little about what is happening and won’t be interested in talking about it. Others may worry in silence, while others may open up and share details. It’s important not to minimize or dismiss their concerns or be too quick to correct them. Let them share freely and then clarify where needed.

Younger children are often unable to distinguish between images on screens and their own personal reality and may believe they are in immediate danger, even if the conflict is happening far away. Older children might have seen troubling things on social media and be worried about how conflicts might escalate. The key is to hold up a figurative emotional mirror, reflect what you see, and offer compassion as you reassure them of their safety. As you show you are interested by listening with your full attention, they will be more likely to open up to you and other trusted adults now and in the future.

2. **Keep it calm and age-appropriate.** Children grow and develop differently, including in their emotional and mental abilities to process images and information. While children have a right to know what’s going on in the world, adults should use wisdom in how much detail to share. Use age-appropriate words, watch their reactions, and be sensitive to their worries. You know your child best. The key is to calm fears and reassure children of their safety.

It is normal for parents to spend time watching the news and feeling emotions of worry, sadness, and anger in times of war and conflict. But remember that children take their emotional cues from adults, so use your time wisely and be cautious in oversharing your emotions with them.
Remind them that many people are working hard around the world to stop the conflict and find peaceful resolutions. It’s okay not to have the answers to every question your child has. You can say that you need to look it up or use it as an opportunity with older children to find the answers together. Use websites of reputable news organizations or international organizations like UNICEF and the UN. Explain that some information online isn’t accurate, and stress the importance of finding reliable sources.

3. **Spread compassion, not stigma.** News stories and images from war and conflict can stir up strong feelings, which can create prejudice and discrimination against a people or a country. When speaking with or around children, avoid labels and name calling, such as “bad people” or “evil” and instead use it as an opportunity to encourage compassion, such as for the families forced to flee their homes.

4. **Focus on those who are doing good.** It’s important for children to know about the good that people are doing for those who suffer from war and conflict. Find and share stories of helpers and heroes who serve and sacrifice for the benefit of those who are affected by war. Talk with children about ways they can help. The sense of doing something, no matter how small, can often bring great comfort.

5. **Continue to check in.** As conflicts arise and news stories gain attention, be sure to check in regularly to see how children feel about war and conflict. Do they have more questions? Are they interested in getting your perspective? Do they want to clarify something they heard or saw?

If your child seems worried or anxious about what’s happening, be especially aware of any changes in how they behave or feel, such as stomachaches, headaches, nightmares, or difficulty sleeping. Children have different reactions to stressful events and some signs of distress might not be so obvious. Younger children may become clingier than usual, while teens
might show intense grief or anger. Many of these reactions only last for a short time and are normal reactions to stressful events. If these reactions last for a prolonged period of time, your child may need to see a counselor or specialist.

*This resource was developed based on tips from the following article: https://www.unicef.org/parenting/how-talk-your-children-about-conflict-and-war

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