

How to Talk to Children About the Ukraine Conflict

Our children are living in unprecedented times in an ever-changing world. Not only do they have to process the challenges of a global pandemic, but we are now facing the added uncertainty of conflict in Europe, which dominates the current news cycle.

As parents, we naturally want to protect our children from scary things, but the reality is that they may be exposed to information about the Ukraine conflict and may be curious, fearful or have questions. We need to be ready to listen.

Before you have any conversations with your children about such a topic, it's important to work through any of your own feelings and any key messages you want them to take away from the conversation.

Example messages (depending on age) could include:

The war is far away and we are safe.

Look for the helpers. In any conflict or natural disaster there are always people who are trying to help and make the situation better.

This is why it is important we vote and value our democratic society.

Things to remember are:

- Be open and transparent. Children pick up on so much more than we realise and will pick up on expressions and tones. Open conversations mean their imaginations don't create worse case scenarios that are far scarier than reality.
- Validate your child's feelings and help them to work through any fears without judgement. This means they will feel comfortable talking to you again if they have further questions or concerns. Leaving the door open for further discussion is really helpful.
- Parents don't have to have all the answers. Give them what factual information you may have, along with a family value. Acknowledge their question or concern and return to it if you need time to think first.
- Most importantly, tailor your response to their age and stage of development:
 - For children under 8, keep things short and clear. Simple messages are best *There's a war far away. The people are standing up for freedom. We are safe here.*
 - For older children, again, keep the message simple but reinforce what is important to you as a family, for example standing up to bullies, safety or freedom. Remind your child that you are the right person to ask.

- For teenagers address specific questions your child may have, correct any misconceptions and encourage them to seek out reliable sources of information. This can be an opportunity to encourage them to think critically about things they may be reading and watching, and build perspective taking skills.

For younger children and parents with a child that may become anxious, it can be helpful to limit exposure to the news, particularly visual content. If you are concerned your child may have read or watched something on the conflict, keeping a casual eye on your child's play can be helpful. Children often use play to process information that they are uncertain or worried about.

If you have any further questions or concerns please don't hesitate to get in touch with School Psychologist, Emma Thompson: ethompson@wilderness.com.au or Counsellor, Julie Blackwell: jblackwell@wilderness.com.au