

A Guide: Age Appropriate Ways to Talk to Kids About War

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General tips:

- Take time to educate yourself and process the news first.
- Determine ahead of time what you want to teach them. What's the one message you want to convey?
- Regardless of your child's age, it's best to be prepared for your child to overhear the news & ask questions (or for their behavior to be impacted due to stress).
- You don't need to have all the answers.



In general, young kids often do not have the cognitive capacity to describe their thoughts and feelings (like we adults do). Oftentimes, they will use play to express themselves & process their emotions.

Don't be alarmed if themes of war/fighting, morality, fairness, good vs. evil, power & control, and death arise in their play. This is healthy and should be encouraged. If you notice these themes, use this opportunity to observe and learn more about your child (vs. trying to shut it down & re-direct it). Remember, this is their way of sharing their internal world with you.



Toddlers:

- They're not developmentally ready to process the concept of war, yet.
- However, they will notice your emotional reactions to the news.
- Be honest about your feelings by saying something like, "I'm feeling sad right now about things that are happening far away. We are safe. And it's ok for me to feel sad, too. All feelings are ok."
- Avoid exposing them to the news.



Preschoolers to Age 8

- Show them a map of the world. Show them where they live & where the war is. Giving them a visual representation will help anchor them to the world events.
- Provide simple facts in short sentences. Be sure to define what "war" means. Pause and open it up for questions.

Here's how it may sound...



"There's a war going on right now. A war means that people are fighting over who should be in charge. Here's where we are. Here's where it's happening. We are safe but it's a big deal because other people are getting hurt. Adults are working hard every day to stop this war. We are safe... And it's perfectly normal to feel nervous, sad, or angry (or any other feeling). I feel _____. What questions do you have? You can always come to me when you have questions or feelings come up. I'm always here."



Preschoolers to Age 8

- Be ready to revisit this topic again and again, especially preschoolers. They don't have fully understand the concept of permanence & may expect things to magically return to normal & may feel confused when they don't.
- Maintain eating, sleeping and play routines. Continue to provide safety and predictability through your every day routines.



Preschoolers to Age 8

- Kids may start to question their safety & other family members' safety. Keep your responses simple and matter of fact. "We are safe. We/They are far from the fighting. Would you like to call them now and talk to them? What can we do right now to help you feel safe?"
- They may also express fears of monsters, the dark, strangers and other unknowns. Again, keep your responses simple, "Monsters are pretend characters we make up (or hear in stories). Let's go check out you room together and make sure it's safe."



Other signs of stress in kids:

- Regressive behaviors (e.g., potty accidents, thumb sucking, baby talk)
- Tantrums/meltdowns
- Being moody or irritable
- Complaining about school
- withdrawing from activities they once enjoyed
- Becoming overly clingy
- Changing eating patterns
- Sleep issues (e.g., resistance, nightmares, bedtime fears, trouble falling or staying asleep)
- Body complaints (e.g., stomachache, headache)