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For Immediate Release

How to Talk to Your Kids about War

“Talking with children about scary events is difficult,” says Amanda Griswold Human Development and Relationships Educator with UW Madison Division of Extension in Crawford County. The University of Minnesota published an article to help families talk to their children about the war in Ukraine. The tips in the article can also serve as a tool to talk with children about other scary events by simply replacing the details about the war with details about whatever tough topic is occurring. Here is the article from the University of Minnesota:

The war in Ukraine has affected all of us and brought constant images from our news sources. This can be frightening, especially for children, and often results in a host of questions.

American television host Fred Rogers has great insight for parents and caregivers that applies here:

Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary.

Before we talk with children, it’s important to make sure we have mentally and emotionally grounded ourselves. First, remember both you and your child may have feelings of anxiety, worry, fear and grief. Know that these are completely normal responses to stressful situations and, rather than trying to correct their negative emotions, you should honor their feelings. Kids don't need us to fix everything; they need us to be present while they experience it. This is a teachable moment for you to model how to handle these emotions.

If you are part of the military community, this war hits close to home. Military kids aren’t thinking only of the war in Ukraine, the constant talk of impending global conflict is worrisome and brings about anxiety. They are close to war without being on the battlefield because they are fearful for the safety of their parents.

Be mindful of what you take in

In addition to modeling emotions, focus on managing what you can manage. You have influence over what your family experiences within your home. It’s important to remain mindful of the news your child is exposed to and the conversations between adults and other children in their lives. Monitor the news you and your child are receiving. Ask yourself, “What information can my child or I handle today? What is helpful now?” Choose what is most meaningful, not what happens to appear in front of you. Pay attention to how information affects your own stress and anxiety because this can spill over to children of all ages. Be mindful of your child’s behavior for possible signs of trauma. A traumatic experience is defined as an event that overwhelms a person’s ability to cope. Examples of behaviors associated with trauma include: avoiding talking about the trauma; disruption in sleep patterns or frequent nightmares, and intrusive thoughts related to the traumatic event.

Once you feel ready, start the conversation. Ask your child what they know and whether they have questions. Address the questions as honestly and age appropriately as possible. If you don't have the answers, search for them with your child.

Remember to communicate carefully and listen to your child with empathy. Ask yourself: "Who do I want to be on the other side of this stressful situation? How does that guide my behavior now?"

Guiding the conversation

Talking about the topic might feel overwhelming. The answers to these questions are complex, and families should consider an ongoing discussion about what is happening, especially as the news about the war evolves.

Who is involved in this war? Discuss the names of countries mentioned in the news articles, online or television news with your children.

Where is this war happening? Find a map or a globe and have your school age child locate those countries mentioned in news articles, online or on television news.

Why did the war start? Wars start for many different reasons. You might want to explain some of the reasons: competition over territory and resources, historical rivalries and grievances, and in self-defense against an aggressor or a perceived potential aggressor. One analogy to use is if someone were to come and take all of the toys because they wanted more. Would that be okay?

What can we do to help? Brainstorm some ideas with your child about ways you can help them grasp what they are hearing or seeing in the news.

Parents may, understandably, be hesitant to talk about such heavy topics with their children. Keep in mind that global crises will have an effect upon children whether you acknowledge them or not. Even if it feels difficult, the healthier choice is to talk with your kids and remember what Mr. Rogers said, "When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary."

A web version of the article can be found here: <https://extension.umn.edu/family-news/how-talk-your-kids-about-war>

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