

How to Talk to Kids about What is Happening in Ukraine

By [Alexia Dellner](#)

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If the past two years of the pandemic have taught us anything, it's that kids *know* when something bad is happening. They may not fully understand what's going on, but they can certainly sense when there's tension. "Kids of all ages are aware when something traumatic is felt and experienced," Dr. Zachary Kahn, clinical psychologist at a school and in private practice tells us. As such, you may want to talk to your children about Russia's escalating invasion of Ukraine. But how should you go about doing that, exactly?

Start by finding out what they know

When it comes to bringing up difficult topics, [the Child Mind Institute](#) suggests using open ended questions in order to allow your child to lead the conversation rather than vice versa. Dr. Kahn recommends starting the conversation by asking them, "what do you know about what's happening? How do you feel about that?"

Licensed therapist [Cynthia Catchings](#) from Talkspace adds: "Knowing how they heard about it can make a difference. Sometimes there are misconceptions, or they get information from friends that is not correct." If that is the case, you'll want to give them accurate information in an age-appropriate manner, while encouraging them to come to you should they learn more.

[The National Association of School Psychologists](#) also advises grown-ups to be patient and make room for kids to talk about how they're feeling: "Some children prefer writing, playing music or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings." In other words, don't assume you need to sit down and have a heart-to-heart with your kid about what's happening—find a way to connect with your child that makes sense for them.

Validate their feelings

Your child may be feeling very confused about what is going on or even scared. “Let them know that it is valid to be concerned or feel afraid, and that you know it is complicated to truly understand why people or governments do what they do,” advises Catchings.

Per Michael Roeske, licensed clinical psychologist and Executive Director of [Newport Healthcare Connecticut](#), the most important thing parents can do is to let kids and teens know they are not alone in how they’re feeling. “You can say it’s OK to feel scared and, depending on the needs of your child in that moment, even that you’re scared too.” On that note, Roeske says that parents should also pay attention to their own feelings, noting that children are often much more perceptive than we give them credit for. “They may not have the language or thoughts of an adult, or feel comfortable expressing them, but they know when something is concerning to you or is not right. In this sense, don’t tell them something much different than how you are doing.”

Let them know that they are safe

Kids feel better when they know how a situation is being handled, so explain to them what adults are doing to keep things safe, the experts at Child Mind Institute tell us. Reassure your child that the grown-ups are in control of the situation. “Let them know that they are safe, and they can come talk to you anytime with any questions they might have,” adds Catchings.

You could say something like, “I know you may have seen some scary images on TV, but know that we are safe in our house.”

Keep things age-appropriate

“Part of the job of being a parent is to acknowledge the truth,” says Dr. Kahn. That doesn’t necessarily mean having to explain what the events of this week mean or going into details about war, but parents should be prepared to clearly explain what is happening based on how old your child is and what they already know.

[The National Association of School Psychologists](#) has helpful advice for how to talk to kids about violence according to their age group. For example, elementary school children need simple information balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to

protect them. High schoolers will have opinions about the causes of violence and may offer ideas for how prevent it.

Stay informed

Depending on the age of your child, you could offer to read or watch the news together and talk about what you just saw, says Catchings. But don't leave the TV on constantly as the invasion plays out. "Try to model behaviors where your kids learn that staying informed is important, but consuming information by the hour is not healthy, and can lead us to feeling some anxiety," advises Catchings.

"This is also an opportunity to teach kids about the countries in conflict and talk about their customs and culture as a way to keep them informed about important things without concentrating solely on the conflict," she adds.

If your child wants to do something to help, you can look into ways to do that could work for your family. [There are many charities and humanitarian organizations](#) that are helping the people of Ukraine that you can read more about.

Keep the conversation going

Don't assume that this is going to be a one-and-done conversation. The end goal should be making sure that your child feels comfortable coming back to you to talk or ask more questions. "Sometimes we get too busy and think that one conversation covered the need to communicate and answer their questions. Give them the time they need to assimilate and reflect on what you talk about together," says Catchings.

Additional resources for parents

- "Scared Kids, How to Deal with Fear," from [The Child Mind Institute](#)
- "Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers," from [The National Association of School Psychologists](#)
- "How to Talk to Kids About Violence," from [The Child Development Institute](#)