

## Supporting Youth Affected by the War in Ukraine: Tips for Parents

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian military is having a significant impact on many children and adults. People feel stress, anxiety, and grief. Some people may worry about family and friends in Europe, about the possibility of service members being at risk, or about the threat to global security and economic stability. Children who are (or who are perceived to be) Eastern European may be at risk of bullying or harassment by peers. Families and schools can work together to help children understand their emotional reactions and to teach effective coping and conflict resolution skills. The tips and resources in this document are intended to help you support your children.

### HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT THE WAR

- Provide time and a safe place for your children to talk about their stress and fears.
- Let children's questions tell you what information they need. Don't assume they are concerned about the same things you are. Use words at their age level of understanding.
- Avoid offering unnecessary or frightening details.
- Clarify misconceptions or misinformation. Differentiate between fact, opinion, and rumors.
- Help children separate reality from imagined fears.
- Provide brief, clear information with reassurance. You could say, "It sounds like you are worried about our safety. Let's think about how our school and community are working to keep us safe."
- Older youth may want to talk about the politics of the conflict at their level of understanding.
- For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!
- Talk about common reactions to the stress of war (below) and acknowledge their feelings.
- Listen, empathize, and affirm that most initial reactions are common and expected.

### POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

There are some common and typical reactions that children and youth feel when their lives are affected by war.

- **Fear.** Children may fear for the safety of themselves, their families here or back home, or friends.
- **Loss of control or helplessness.** Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. Youth may grasp at any control that they have, including refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with favorite toys, or leave their caregivers.
- **Anger.** Anger is a common reaction and may be directed toward classmates, teachers, or caregivers. Anger often masks other emotions, so adults can help youth identify and manage their underlying feelings.
- **Insecurity.** Youth can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance.
- **Isolation.** They may also feel isolated, or as if they're the only one having the feelings they do.
- **Confusion.** Youth may have trouble understanding the difference between violence in video games and the real events taking place on the news.
- **Desperation.** Some youth and families understandably feel desperate to get information about the status of family and friends. This can cause worry and a desire to constantly scan news sources for any information about the events. Strive for a balance between seeking information and managing intense emotions. Let children know it is okay to feel upset, and then teach them ways to appropriately deal with those feelings.

## KNOW THE SIGNS OF MORE SERIOUS REACTIONS

Most children will be able to cope with their concerns with the help of caring adults. However, children who have had a past traumatic experience, had a personal loss, or suffer from depression or other mental illness may be at greater risk for severe reactions. Contact your school for help if children show significant changes in behavior, including the following symptoms, for more than 2 weeks. Seek the help of a teacher, counselor, or school psychologist if you are at all concerned. *If your child shows signs of self-harm or suicidal thinking, seek help immediately.*

- **Preschoolers:** thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, or withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **K–12 children:** irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends, sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, or poor concentration.

## HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

- **Emphasize** that, although we can't control everything that's happening, many adults care deeply about them and will do all they can to ensure that they are safe.
- **Model** calm and control. Children are more in control when the adults around them are in control. Children often look to adults to determine how to respond and cope with stress, so it is important that adults model positive coping strategies.
- **Understand** that knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, say something like, "This is really hard for you/us." It is okay to acknowledge that you don't like the situation. Try to recognize the feelings underlying youth's actions and put them into words. You could say, "I can see you are feeling really scared about this," or "It is hard to think that [loved one] is so far away."
- **Remember** that it's okay to say "I don't know" when youth ask questions like "When will the conflict end?" Acknowledge how frustrating the uncertainty is by saying "It's hard not to have all the answers."
- **Encourage** schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but do not push youth who seem overwhelmed.
- **Keep** a regular schedule and foster healthy nutrition, sleep, and exercise.
- **Set limits** around television and social media viewing, as too much can increase fears. Excessive time on social media can have negative effects on children's mental health, increasing their stress, anxiety, and feelings of grief. It can result in problems with school performance. Watch the news with your child so you can discuss the situation factually, provide reassurance, and monitor their reactions.
- **Teach** your children to calm themselves in times of stress. Some strategies include mindfulness and deep breathing, guided relaxation and meditation, journaling, coloring, puzzles, listening to calming sounds and music, movement (e.g., walking, yoga, exercise routines), spending time with others, and talking to a friend or adult about what is happening or how they are feeling.
- **Help** students be allies for friends or family who may be struggling. Help them to seek support or volunteer in programs or organizations that can help with their needs. Focus on their skills and strengths and on what we can do here to help. Every contribution is meaningful.
- **Communicate** with your child's school. Schools are a good place for children to experience a sense of normalcy by being with friends and teachers. Notify your child's teacher if you have concerns. Immediately report any instances of bullying, harassment, or discrimination that your child observes or experiences.
- **Prevent** stereotyping of cultures and countries. Children and youth can easily repeat negative statements made by the media. Reinforce respect and empathy for all people.

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