



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
GREEK ORTHODOX LADIES PHILOPTOCHOS SOCIETY, INC.
126 East 37th Street • New York, NY 10016 • 212.977.7770 • www.philoptochos.org
Confidential Social Work Tel: 212.977.7782 • socialwork@philoptochos.org



National Philoptochos Department of Social Services

8 Questions Kids Are Asking About War And How To Answer Them

Expert advice to guide parents' conversations about war with their children

By Caroline Bologna

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War is a difficult reality, filled with unspeakable horrors and trauma. The latest conflict in Ukraine has only underscored this. On top of feeling pained by each news story, worried about friends and family members, and stressing about the economic effects of war, parents are also grappling with another concern: ***How do I explain this to my children?***

"It's second nature to want to shield our children from news about violence, but the fact of the matter is they are hearing a lot of things at school, on the playground or even from their older siblings," said Ericka Souter, author of *"How to Have a Kid and a Life: A Survival Guide."*

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Don't wait for your kids to bring up the topic. Starting the conversation, yourself, establishes that you are a trusted source for support and information during difficult times, and your kids can feel comfortable coming to you with any concerns.

"Start by saying something like, 'There's a war happening in Ukraine. Can you tell me what you know about it or what you've heard about it?'" advised Robin Gurwitch, a psychologist and professor at Duke University Medical Center.

"If you have an older child or teen who says something like, 'I'm fine, I don't care,' then say you're curious about what their classmates are saying about it at school." By starting with a question, you gather the context you need to shape the conversation. Address the information they share, and then ask if they have any questions for you.

Talking about war is never easy, and children can react and respond in multiple ways," said Martin Forster, a child psychologist at the Swedish telehealth provider Kry. "The key takeaway as parents is making sure you are providing an environment where they feel safe and comfortable to talk about anything that is weighing on them." Although children's questions and concerns about war rarely have simple answers, it's important to address them in informative, developmentally appropriate ways.

Below, Forster, Gurwitch, Souter and other experts share the common questions kids ask about war and their advice for answering them.

"Why is there war?"

A simple but fundamental question many children — as well as adults — ask when it comes to war is, "Why?" Souter noted that parents will likely get queries along the lines of "Why is there a war? Why are they fighting?" "If you have a young child around 5, consider something like this: 'They are fighting over who gets to be the leader or the boss. But war is not a good thing. I wish they could talk instead of fighting,'" she suggested. "For an older child, consider a more nuanced answer: 'Russia wants to take control of Ukraine. But the Ukraine is an independent country, and they don't want Russia to take them over. That is why they are resisting and fighting.'"

Sarah Jones, a reporter and author of “A Kids Book About War,” recorded a companion podcast to help explain war to children that can guide this conversation.

“If we were to sum it up in three sentences, it would be that Ukraine was once part of Russia, and it hasn’t been since the 1990s,” she said. “But since Ukraine ousted its pro-Russia president in 2014, the country has been shifting alliances away from Russia and towards Europe/NATO/EU and the U.S. And Russian President Putin feels that a stronger Europe/U.S./NATO/EU means a weaker Russia.”

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Sóuter emphasized using age-appropriate language, being honest and reassuring your children that they are safe. There’s no need to go into detail with younger children who are scared by violence. “You may also want to tell them, ‘War is very bad and scary. I wish the two countries would talk about their problems and find a peaceful solution so that they can end this war,’” she added.

Teens might want to know more about the history of the conflict and the countries involved. Consider doing some research together. “And it’s OK to engage in conversations about politics if you feel your child is interested and mature enough to engage,” Sóuter added.

“What’s happening to the people there?”

Jones noted that some children might ask what is happening to the people in the war zone and if anyone is getting hurt or dying. “You can answer, ‘Yes, people are getting hurt and dying. This generally happens in war,’” she suggested.

Your child might also want to know what’s happening to the kids there. If they can handle this information, you can mention that children are getting hurt and even dying as well.

Jones also advised saying something along the lines of: “Some kids are safe and with their families. Others may have been separated from their family. Some are scared, some are traumatized. Some have lost their homes and don’t know when they’ll be able to return to their country because they are now refugees.

You can use your conversation to talk about what trauma means and explain what a refugee is.

But not all wounds are visible. Trauma can leave invisible wounds.” This also provides an opportunity to talk about what trauma means (*A Kid’s Book About Trauma*, by Megan Bartlett – for ages 5+) and explain what a refugee is. (<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/refugee>)

“Am I in danger?”

When you’re a child, your world is very small, so it’s common for little kids to worry that the bad things they hear about are happening nearby and will affect them directly. Parents need to reassure their children that they are safe.

“With younger children, you could simply show them a map of the world and identify the distance between Ukraine and your current location,” Forster said. “With older children, it can be recognizing their fears but then also noting the likelihood of worst-case scenarios and emphasizing your country’s provisions and history, such as military leaders being ready to defend their country.” Emphasize that your child is safe and loved and that you will always protect the family. If they’re still worried, you can explain all the different things you do to keep your family safe at all times and talk about “the helpers” in the world who work to keep everyone safe.

Be prepared for a range of emotions, as every child responds to difficult information — and subsequent reassurance — differently. “Your child may have big feelings, or they may just turn around and run off and play without any big feelings left over,” Jones noted.

“What about this thing I saw on TikTok or heard at school?”

“With today’s rapid flow of information across the globe, news of the war in Ukraine reaches children in multiple mediums, ranging from TikTok to major news channels, and even discussion in schools, making it an almost impossible task to entirely shield your child,” Forster said. “It is good for your children to be informed, but some of these channels are more reliable than others.”

Parents and caregivers play an important role in correcting any misinformation their children encounter. Ask your kids what exactly they heard and where they heard it. Talk about whether that’s a reliable source of news and address any fears or incorrect information they might have gleaned from it. And teach them how to recognize the difference (www.huffpost.com/entry/parents-teach-kids-media-literacy_1_5fab43e3c5b6ed84597c3fc4) between high- and low-quality sources.

“This is not to say that as a parent you must become an expert on the conflict, but rather be open and honest on what is happening in the war and enable them to understand, explain and decide if the source of news is factual and trustworthy,” Forster noted.

With little kids, be mindful of the snapshots of the news they might get from the TV or even magazines at the grocery store checkout.

“Helping your child cope with a violent world seems daunting, especially as traditional media and social media amplify and dramatize current events,” said Toya Roberson-Moore, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Pathlight Mood & Anxiety Center. “That’s why it is so important to limit children’s exposure to media and have conversations with them directly, to help them cope with their fears and put things into perspective.”

Older children might be allowed to watch the news or engage with social media, but as with adults, it’s important that they take breaks to avoid anxiety spikes.

“Many tweens and teens have heard and seen a lot of misinformation and worrying memes on social media platforms,” Roberson-Moore added. “It’s important to ask your children if they have any questions about what they’re viewing on social media.”

“Can we help?”

Explain to your child that, although we can’t stop the war, there are ways to help the people affected. “We often see that in times of stress, children and teens want to make a difference,” Gurwitsch said. “I’ve heard lots wonderful stories of teens organizing bake sales and donating the proceeds to organizations supporting the people fleeing Ukraine.”

Look into what local churches, schools or other community-based groups are doing, and find age-appropriate ways to contribute. Brainstorm ideas with your children. Help kids focus on what they and their families have control over when it comes to war.

Look into what local churches, schools or other community-based groups are doing, and find age-appropriate ways to contribute. Brainstorm ideas with your children. Craig Knippenberg, a therapist and author of “Wired and Connected: Brain-Based Solutions to Ensure Your Child’s Social and Emotional Success,” noted that these kinds of actions help kids focus on what they and their families have control over when it comes to war.

“Children have been wearing blue and yellow ribbons or making blue and yellow bracelets as a show of support,” he said. “Teens have been buying items on Etsy to provide financial assistance for Ukraine. You can say prayers as a family or donate money. Even putting a war-related note in your family hope jar can offer a child peace and comfort.”

Jones suggested encouraging your child to write to their elected officials. Take the opportunity to explain how democracy works and how the government is built to serve citizens and listen to their concerns. “You can write to the president and tell him what you think,” she suggested saying. “You can write to the U.N., or

NATO or the EU. You can start a petition or organize a protest. Being an American gives us so many rights that many other people do not have. So exercise your rights and empower yourself. And the first step to that is always knowledge. So read, ask questions, learn, be informed, then act.”

“Are you scared?”

Children take emotional cues from their parents. Although you can express that you have concerns about the situation, try to model a sense of calm.

“Take a moment to reflect internally and consider if you, as a parent or guardian, can talk about the war without having your own anxieties and fears leaking into the conversation,” Forster said. “It is important to try to avoid projecting any of your own fears. While some children may be afraid of the war, many aren’t, but feelings of fear can develop if they sense this from their trusted caretaker.”

Even when you aren’t directly speaking to your children, be mindful of what you say in their presence. They might pick up snippets of your phone conversations and fill in the blanks with something far worse than reality.

“Just as a little extra patience and attention goes a long way when kids are stressed, we also need to take care of ourselves as parents and caregivers,” Gurwitch said. “This war and the potential economic hardships that go with it

When your feelings about war come up in conversations with your children, use it as an opportunity to talk to them about your beliefs and values. “Talk about how your family treats people of different nationalities or people who are different from you in any way,” Gurwitch suggested. “Ask, ‘How do you want people to treat us in situations where we have differences from others?’ Talk about bullying and standing up for others. Establish that you’re a trusted adult your child can always turn to.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“I’ve noticed that most of the questions children have been asking since the beginning of the war in Ukraine fit into three categories: What will happen to me, what will happen to the world and what will happen to Ukraine,” Forster said. “These questions are complex and do not come with an easy one-size-fits-all answer.”

Of course, nobody really knows what will happen in times of conflict. Instead of offering predictions you can’t guarantee, ask your child what they think might happen and how they’re feeling about the future.

“With this knowledge, you can then move the conversation to their potential fears and anxieties,” Forster noted. “It is best to avoid asking leading questions and instead opt for open questions to explore the topic and allow children and young adults to make their own conclusions. For older kids that can better comprehend the war, don’t sweep aside their questions and insist everything will be fine. Try to address their fears and answer as best you can.”

Be honest and rational. Express that you don’t know what will happen and that the situation is evolving. “Sometimes they might ask a question and the answer is, ‘I don’t know, but we can look it up and find out together. And if things change, I will let you know,’” Gurwitch said.

If you have older children, you might get questions about nuclear weapons. Sites like PBS have shared expert-backed information to help guide these discussions.

“Older students can benefit from learning about MAD (mutually assured destruction) and how this policy has kept nuclear attacks from happening,” Knippenberg said. “Emphasize the importance of focusing on what they can change in their own lives. Your family can also get involved in anti-nuclear activism.”

Ask older relatives to share stories about how grandparents or parents dealt with their fears during the Cold War. Share how other wars have ended with peaceful negotiation.”

He also suggested having older relatives share stories about how grandparents or parents dealt with these fears during the Cold War. “You can reference how wars have been going on for a long time and that this isn’t something new in human civilization,” Knippenberg said. “You can also share how other wars have ended with peaceful negotiation.”

“I’m still worried. What do I do?”

Talking about war is not a one-and-done conversation. Continue to check in with your child, ask them how they feel and make sure they know they can come to you with any concerns at any time. If they’re not big talkers, give them the chance to express how they’re feeling through art or playtime.

“Make sure to validate what they are feeling — sad, scared, angry and empathic,” Knippenberg said. Focus on maintaining a healthy routine at home, with consistent mealtimes, bedtimes and homework

time. “Find ways for the family to spend a little more time together,” Gurwitch said.

“There are lots of ways to add laughter and joy to your day — whether it’s playing a family game, taking a walk together, or teaching the dog new tricks.”

Parenting educator Laura Linn Knight shared some mindfulness tools for moments of high stress and worry.

“Fear often lives in the future, so help your child come back into the present moment,” she advised. “You can do this by helping your child notice what is in the space around them. What does your child hear in that moment, what do they see, what do they notice in their body?”

Of course, it’s normal for kids to still have negative feelings during stressful times, but if they express that it’s getting worse or you observe major behavioral changes affecting everyday life, further action might be necessary.

Pay attention to shifts in your child’s sleep, concentration and ability to learn new information. “They may have more challenges at school, might seem more irritable, throw more tantrums, have problems with peers, show social withdrawal or lack of interest in things they enjoyed in the past,” Gurwitch said.

Parents and caregivers know their kids, so pay attention to shifts in a child’s sleep, concentration and ability to learn new information.

- *Are they facing more challenges at school?*
- *Are they more irritable?*
- *Are they throwing more tantrums?*
- *Are they having problems with peers they didn’t have before?*
- *Are they showing social withdrawal or lack of interest in things they enjoyed in the past?*

If you see changes, speak to your pediatrician, family doctor or mental health professional.

“We as parents and caregivers know our kids, so if you see a lot of these changes, ask your pediatrician, family doctor or mental health professional, and take a look at trusted resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network or American Psychological Association.”

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