


TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT WAR AND CONFLICT

When conflict or war is in the news, our children and teenagers can experience a range of strong emotions from fear and anxiety, to anger, confusion and sadness. Some children and teens may be able to talk about these feelings, but other children will show us through their behaviour by being clingy or finding it hard to separate from adults, showing signs of panic, acting out violence in their play, or asking lots and lots of questions. Some children will even show us their distress by being dismissive and ambivalent about war and conflict, as if they don't care.

Children look to their trusted adults for information about how serious the danger is, and how to make sense of what is happening for them, and out there in the world. There are many things we can do as supportive adults to help our children face the painful reality of war and conflict.

This resource is for all adults supporting a child or teenager to digest the impact of war and conflict on them as individuals, on communities and on the world.

VALIDATE THE CHILD'S REACTIONS AND QUESTIONS



It can be tempting to try to protect our children by minimising or even denying the magnitude and tragedy of war. Sometimes we find ourselves reassuring children with comments like "Oh don't be silly, it's not happening here" or "It's nothing to worry about".

Children benefit from having their emotional responses validated and accepted without judgement or being minimised. By welcoming their emotions, they learn from you that their reactions are okay; that there are no right or wrong ways to feel and that it is safe to show others what is coming up for them.

THINGS YOU CAN SAY:

"Many people feel the same way as you, it's natural for humans to feel so sad when other people are hurting"

"It can be scary when we see fighting and wonder if it might happen in our country or town. It isn't happening anywhere near here at the moment. If this changes, I will tell you and you can check in with me whenever you like"

"It's understandable you feel worried. It's so hard hearing about people dying"

"It's important to ask those big questions so that you can understand what is happening around you"

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MAKING SPACE:
ACCEPTING ALL FEELINGS

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BE HONEST AND CONSIDER THE AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE OF THE CHILD

Children need us to be honest about what is happening. Answer their questions as openly as you can with simple and clear information, presented in a calm and grounded way.

It can be helpful to ask ourselves the question: how old is the child and what is appropriate for them to know, see and hear?

Adapt the detail for your child's age, being mindful of how much they are able to understand and take in.



IT'S OKAY NOT TO KNOW



War and conflict bring so much uncertainty and unpredictability. Be honest when your child asks you something that you do not know the answer to. Let them know that it's okay not to know.

"It is not possible to know how long this war will last for. It's tough not knowing, isn't it?"

"Sometimes decisions by leaders to start a war are hard to explain and understand. There are lots of other people right now who are confused too".

LIMIT THE EXPOSURE TO GRAPHIC IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS



Some forms of information have a greater potential to cause distress because they remain 'unprocessed' in our nervous systems. Graphic images, videos of distressed or injured people and images of war-torn villages can stay 'frozen in time' in our children's minds and hearts. The radio news can also be quite overwhelming when it is a couple of minutes of headlines that children might only hear some of and have no way of understanding the details.

Consider limiting their exposure to such graphic detail on the TV, radio and social media - and focus on sharing the information through conversation with you; or information resources based on words rather than distressing imagery and pictures.

CONSIDER THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE CHILD

Exposure to trauma such as war and conflict in the media can re-awaken a child's own past experiences of trauma which may include many of the same emotions - fear, terror, anxiety, distress or loss. Being confronted with the reality of war can trigger children to time-travel back to times in their life when they were in danger.

Children who already carry trauma need greater sensitivity, protection and care from the adults around them. Keep an eye out for children who might become re-traumatised by their exposure to war imagery and stories, and consider what support and help they might need. Visit our website for more information about supporting traumatised children and families.



TALK ABOUT GEOGRAPHY

Younger children in particular naturally have a limited sense of geography and distance. Watching war on the television may give them a feeling that the war is nearby, and that their country is in danger. Show children on a globe or a world map where they are in relation to the war, and be clear that the war is not happening in the country they live in. Share the facts about distance and time from where they are, to make the geography concrete.



FIND OUT WHAT THEY KNOW. FACT CHECK THE INFORMATION THEY ARE SEEING

Older children are often exposed to information that, as adults, we can't always monitor. They may hear news from their friends, from social media (particularly TikTok where people in conflict zones may be posting live videos of their experiences), from Youtube or Google. **Wonder with them:**

"What do you already know about what's happening?"

"Where do you learn what you know about the conflict?"

"What pictures or videos have you seen?"

"What are your friends saying about the fighting?"

For teens, talk to them about the complexities of propaganda, fake news and misinformation; and how 'fact checking' can be helpful in times of war. To support them with this, you might watch some of their social media videos with them and it will be important to have a sense of what is happening for yourself as you do this, so that you are calm and thoughtful in your responses. A good source of information that will be accessible to most children aged 7+ is the BBC Newsround website <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>

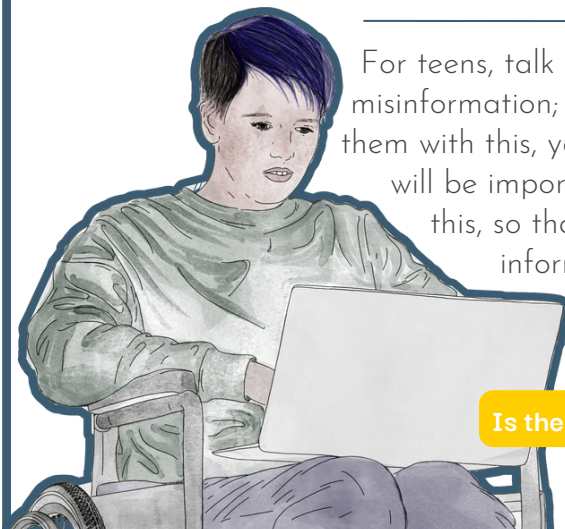
Useful questions to ask and explore together might include:

Is the source of this information reliable?

Has the image or video been verified?

Who is sharing this information and why?

When was this published?



HAVE CURIOUS, OPEN CONVERSATIONS

Don't wait for your child to start talking to you - be curious with them and create opportunities for conversation.

Remember that children often feel freer to talk when they are doing something with you or alongside you. **Sometimes the best talking happens when:**

- You are in the car together
- You are walking
- You are playing a game or sport
- You are cooking
- You are making, drawing, creating
- You are getting your child ready for bed



Here are some curious conversation starters - pick the ones that feel like a good 'fit' with your child's (developmental) age:

What thoughts go round your mind when you see the news?

Are you concerned about anything specific?

What feelings show up for you when you hear adults talking about the war?

Tell me about the worries you have for us, or other people affected by the fighting?

When and where are your feelings the hardest, biggest, deepest, sharpest?

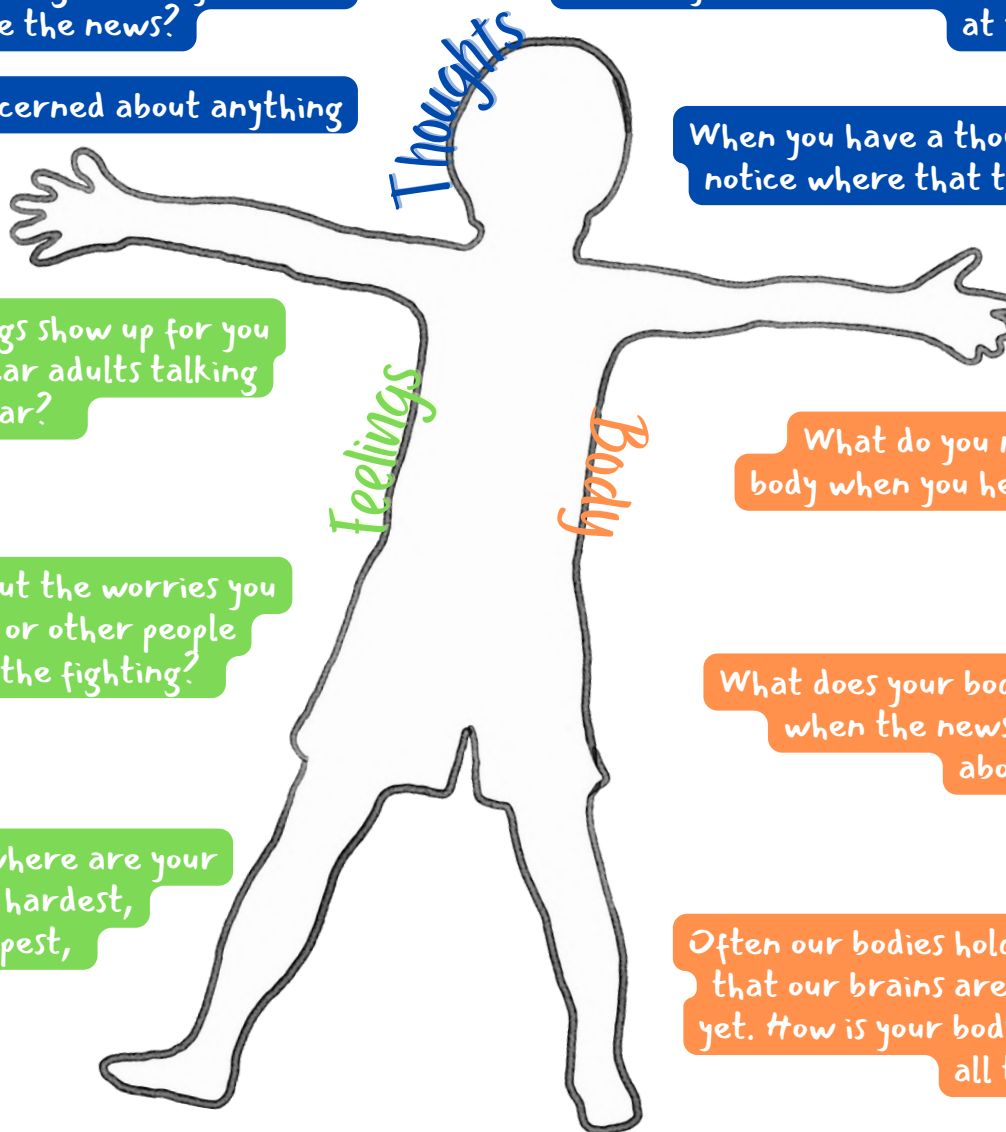
How do you understand what is happening at the moment?

When you have a thought, can you notice where that thought sits in your body?

What do you notice in your body when you hear about the fighting?

What does your body want to do when the news is on talking about the war?

Often our bodies hold information that our brains aren't ready for yet. How is your body doing about all this fighting?



Before the conversation closes, check in with your child. See that they are feeling okay and ask if they need anything from you.

FIND THE HELPERS

In every war and every conflict, there are always helpers. Re-direct conversations about the conflict, death and destruction to the doctors, the shop-keepers, the humanitarian aid routes, the charities, the emergency services, the local and global fundraisers, the international peace talks and so on. Show them images and pictures of helpers, find stories of helpers and imagine together how it might feel to be helping in such sad and difficult times.



SPREAD COMPASSION. AVOID STEREOTYPES

War and conflict divides communities and can often breed discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. Avoid broad brush descriptions such as "those people are evil", and instead show compassion and respect for all. Remind your child that everyone deserves to be safe and protected, and that we can make a difference to the world by being kind.

For older children and teens, it might also be appropriate to ask if they know anyone at school who is from the country or countries where there is fighting. It can also be important to flag up that not everyone in either country will think like the leaders, and those people are not responsible for the decisions about war.



PARTICIPATE IN POSITIVE ACTION

One of the hardest parts of conflict and war for all of us can be the feeling of helplessness. Think together with your child about what small things you can do to help. **You can consider:**

- Shopping for supplies together and sending them to organisations who can distribute them
- Researching relevant charities and donating small amounts of pocket money
- Holding a fundraising event as a family or at school
- Writing a letter to politicians or Human Rights organisations
- Designing a poster about peace
- Writing a poem about the importance of safety and kindness
- Starting a petition
- Lighting a candle together and wish for peace



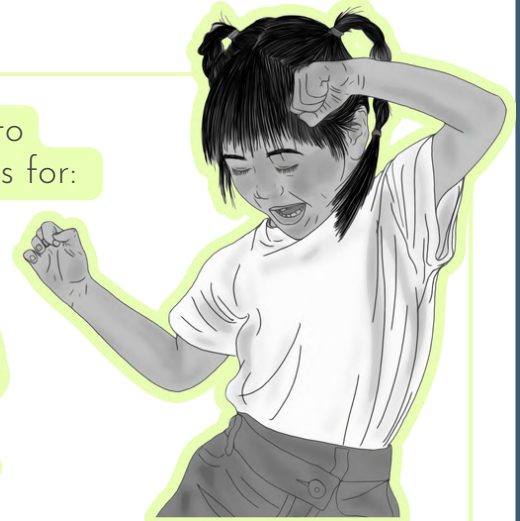
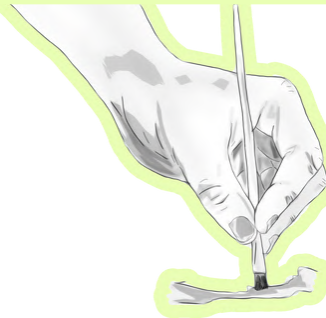
HELP THEM EXPRESS AND MANAGE THEIR DISTRESS

Children learn how to manage their distress through the adults around them. See yourself as a guide, a mentor, someone they will be looking towards to help them navigate this painful territory.

CREATIVITY

Children and teens often can't or don't use words to show us how they feel. Instead, create opportunities for:

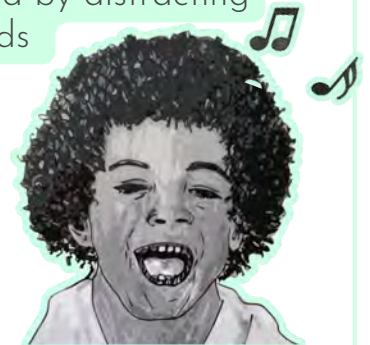
- Drawing
- Painting
- Junk modelling
- Modelling with clay
- Dancing and moving
- Sound and Rhythm



DISTRACTION

Help your child to 'dose' their exposure to the conflict by connecting to it in small chunks of times and intensity. You can lighten the load by distracting your child's mind and heart away from the pain and towards something neutral or fun. Try:

- Playing word games / wordle
- Listening and singing to favourite songs
- Cooking and baking together
- Watching a favourite comedy show



GROUNDING

When a child finds it hard to move out of feeling distressed, it can be really helpful to help them ground back into the here and now. You could try:

- Getting them moving - go for a walk, kick or throw a ball, jump on a trampoline
- Giving them a familiar and comforting smell on a piece of clothing or a teddy
- Asking them to say out loud 3 things they can see, hear, feel, taste, smell
- Giving them something to chew that has a strong taste
- Hugging them or holding them tightly
- Taking some deep breaths together
- Laughing about something together



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HELP THEM EXPRESS AND MANAGE THEIR DISTRESS

RE-CONNECT THEM TO THEIR UNIQUE SAFETY

Orient your child to how they can find the feeling of safety in their world. Explore with them:

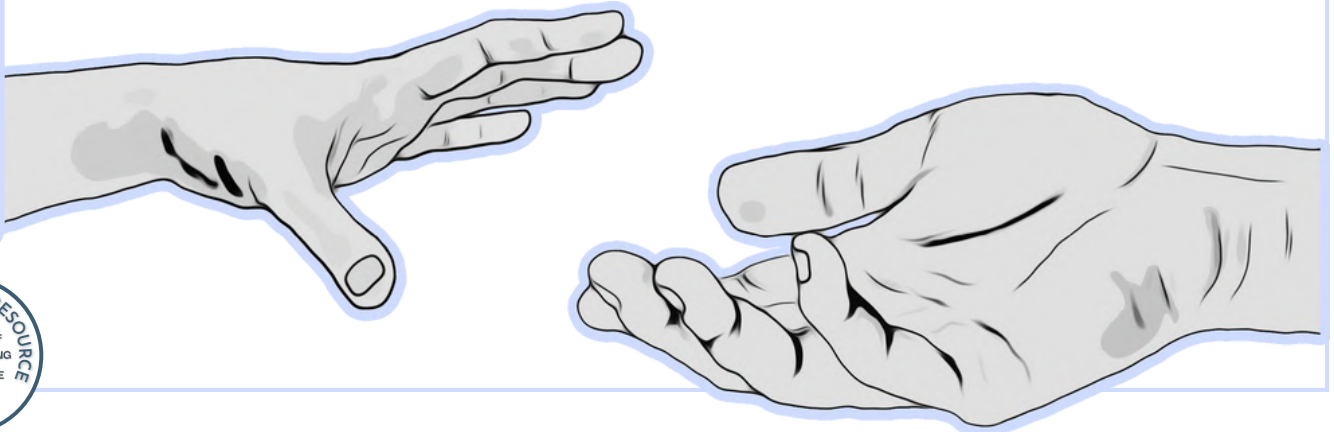
- Who in your world gives you a feeling of safety, that's everything it's okay?
- Where do you feel most relaxed and safe?
- What kind of things do you do that helps your body to feel settled and secure?
- What do you find helpful to remember about you, your family and your life when the war worries you?
- What can you carry with you to help you feel steady and settled? (such as a photo, or a stone, or some reassuring words).



KEEP YOUR CONNECTION ALIVE

Children and teens who feel that their safety, or the safety of the world, is under threat need greater connection with those who they trust and love. Small gestures can go a long way. Consider:

- Let them know they are not alone. Say things like "you are not alone, I am right here with you"
- Drawing a heart on your hand and their hand as they part to go to school
- Giving them a 'transitional object' which is something that reminds them of you to carry with them
- Be in touch more than you might usually - if you have a teen with a mobile, text them a little more than usual to see how they are doing
- Humour and play are the best connectors! Bring light-heartedness and playfulness into each day.
- Tell your child that they are loved and that they are safe.
- Bring them in close - give them hugs, hold their hand, snuggle up on the sofa.



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childline
ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME

Childline - 0800 111

SAMARITANS

Samaritans - 116 123

newsround

BBC newsround - www.bbc.co.uk/newsround



National Literacy Trust - <https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/all-party-parliamentary-group-literacy/fakenews/newsliteracy/child-friendly-news-sources/> - lots of info here about child friendly news sources (some are paid)

LET YOUR CHILD
KNOW WHERE ELSE
THERE IS HELP AND
INFORMATION

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

We can help our children best when we are feeling as calm and clear as possible.

Notice what is coming up for you, and catch those early signs of stress, anxiety or worry. Everyone does this in different ways.

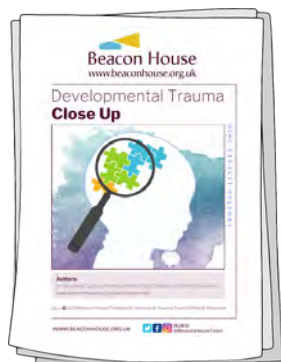
Consider what will help you to find your calm. The ideas we have referenced in this resource may help you too.



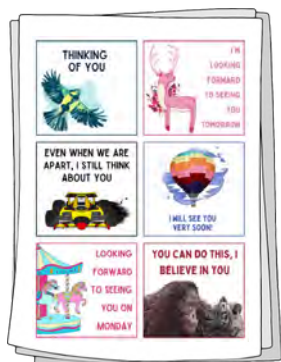
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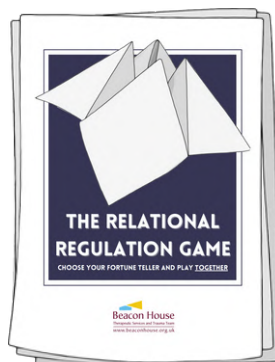
At Beacon House, we are passionate about sharing freely accessible information and resources to everyone about the impact of trauma, loss and adversity on us all. Take a look on our website for a whole range of beautiful free resources: www.beaconhouse.org.uk/resources.



EDUCATION



PRINTABLES



ACTIVITIES



ANIMATIONS

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