

**Norland
Know-Hows**

**Talking to children
about war and
conflict**

It's been a worrying time for all of us watching what's happening in Ukraine. This could be even scarier for young children who are trying to understand what's happening and why.

Seeing images and hearing about war and conflict can be extremely distressing for children. Norlander and Head of Consultancy, Agency, Alumni and Training Julia Gaskell has compiled some helpful advice for parents, carers and nannies on how to talk to children about war and conflict in an age-appropriate way. This includes strategies such as emotion coaching which students are taught on our BA (Hons) Early Years Development and Learning degree and Norland diploma integrated course.

Top tips

- Highlight the positive aspects which will help the child to feel safer. Explore the ways that people are helping others and the great job various people and professionals are doing to support and help protect Ukrainian children and make sure we and others are safe, such as doctors and nurses, and governments taking steps to support refugees. You could draw or make a list of all the helpers and think about how you can help others with your child, such as donating essentials or supporting a charity.
- Find out what your child already knows. Ask open-ended questions that are appropriate to your child's age level. This gives you a chance to learn how much your child knows and find out if they're hearing the wrong information or have been told something that's inaccurate. It also helps to address specific concerns they may have. Children take things very literally so it's critical to check for understanding. For example: "Do you know where Russia is?". Use clear and brief information but don't overload them with too many facts.
- Be sensitive to your child's response and attune to their needs. If they want to talk, listen to them. If they do not want to talk, respect that. You can always revisit another time. Listen to their fears without judgement and reassure them that they can talk about their feelings at any time. Children will often worry more about other people than themselves. Make sure that you give them your full attention.
- Be open and honest where feasible. Children will worry more if they feel that things are being kept a secret from them. Help your child feel safe but tell the truth. Only give as much detail as is needed or that your child is interested in and focus on what everyone is doing to stay safe. Watch closely to ensure their anxieties are relieved.
- It's ok not to know the answers to their questions. You could find out the answer together. Make sure that you visit reputable child-friendly websites so that they do not see scary headlines or pictures, such as Newsround.
- Limit news time and make sure you are aware of what they are accessing so that you can put it into context or explain as appropriate.
- Don't be afraid to reflect your feelings and to acknowledge that it's upsetting for you too.
- Check in regularly with them as they might gather information from school or friends that you need to be aware of.
- Before starting a conversation work out what you want to say and what the message is. Make sure that as many adults as possible in your environment are saying the same thing.
- If your child goes to school, find out how they are approaching the topic and what they are saying.
- Remember that all feelings are ok – it is the way we express them that can be difficult. They all have a purpose. See below for tips on supporting a child experiencing strong emotions.

Using emotion coaching

A strategy you might want to use is emotion coaching. Emotion coaching is a way of telling a child that they are supported, cared about, understood and respected, while also communicating that not all behaviours are acceptable and that they need to moderate how to express their feelings and desires.

Its usage is supported by growing evidence from neuroscientific research about how we regulate our stress and how we come to terms with the fact that we can't always get what we want. These are vital skills for coping with particularly stressful or overwhelming times, which we are all going to be experiencing in the days and weeks ahead.

All Norland students are trained in emotion coaching alongside other strategies, such as reading books, that help children to understand their feelings.

If you notice your child is getting upset about the war, try the following:

- Take them to a calm space in the house, acknowledge how they might be feeling and empathise: "Ahh, I think you must be feeling afraid/uncertain/anxious."
- Validate their frustration or anxiety: "It's normal to be anxious/afraid when things like this are happening elsewhere/when things we don't really understand happen/when we hear about scary things happening."
- Be explicit about how you're helping them and why: "I know that you seem to be worried about what's happening, but you are safe and remember there are people trying to help make things safe again for everyone. Why don't we don't some breathing games together to help you feel calmer. Then we can read your favourite story".
- Once the child is calmer you can teach them strategies for coping next time they are feeling overwhelmed, tired, or lose control.

Don't forget to manage your own worries and look after yourself. It's a very worrying time. While it's important to have honest conversations with children, it's also important to try and keep calm and manage our own fears when talking to them to help them to feel safe. Children will be anxious and concerned because their parents and carers are. Remember you're their safe haven. Take time to look after yourself and find moments of peace where you can.