

How to Talk to Kids About Ukraine

Young people have access to more news streams than ever, and many are concerned. Here's how to address their questions.

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If your kids have heard about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they may be feeling nervous. Thanks to social media and online outlets, young people have access to more news sources than ever. Many are bound to have questions about the history between the two countries and how the clash may affect the rest of the world.

"My tween called me at work yesterday to ask me if this was World War III," said Emily W. King, a child psychologist based in Raleigh, N.C.

How should you answer your kids' questions about what's going on? If they don't ask, should you bring up the issue yourself?

Here's what experts suggest.

Take cues from your kid.

If your child asks questions, it may not be that they are terrified or upset. Many kids "will just ask us questions out of curiosity," Dr. King said. When they do, try to answer them calmly and accurately, without getting overly emotional yourself, she said.

Young kids may not know about the conflict, but tweens and teens may well have heard things from friends or seen worrying memes on Instagram or TikTok.

"I have already heard teens on social media sharing jokes about gearing up to be drafted for World War III or about nuclear threats to cities that they may live in," said Dr. Hina Talib, an adolescent medicine specialist at the Atria Institute and pediatrician at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

If they don't seem all that interested in what's happening, that's OK, too, said Robyn Silverman, a child and teen development specialist. "You don't need to push it," she said, although she suggested that parents at least broach the topic — perhaps by asking what their children have heard about the conflict — and make sure they know a bit about what's going on.

"You can say 'Look, I totally get that you're not interested in this moment. But if you are, please come to me,'" Dr. Silverman said.

Look for signs that your child is feeling anxious.

Sometimes, kids will ask questions that indicate they're feeling anxious. Other times, though, they will worry silently — so it's important to look out for less obvious signs that they're nervous. Kids struggling with anxiety can, for instance, have trouble sleeping, possibly because they are woken up by thoughts or images they saw in the news, Dr. Talib said.

Anxious kids may also have a change in appetite: not eating as much as usual or eating more comfort foods. They may be irritable, clingy or sick with stomachaches. If you see signs of anxiety in your child, "letting them know you are there to talk, often without even having a big talk, can go a long way," Dr. Talib said.

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Don't bombard kids with news or scary images.

Although it's understandable to want to keep abreast of the news, be aware that your child may be watching or listening, too. "Having news on, where there's constantly images circulating that may be disturbing to them — that's not going to be your best choice," Dr. Silverman said.

You may not want to search for information online while with your child, either, Dr. King added. "You cannot control what images or videos might pop into view that cannot be unseen," she said. "Either research yourself and share information with your child in a way they can understand without feeling overly fearful or share an article for them to read that you have vetted yourself."

If you're worried that your child is doomscrolling on a device, encourage them to make smart media choices, Dr. Talib suggested. "Ask them which news sources they are following and why, and what coverage has helped them understand more about the conflict versus made their heart race more," she said.

If kids are getting their information from social media, Dr. Silverman suggested pointing them instead to reputable sources of news and information. Common Sense Media recommends a handful of news sites and apps specifically designed for kids, including News-O-Matic and Newsela, as well as sources appropriate for teens, such as NPR and HuffPost Teen.

Understand Russia's Attack on Ukraine

What is at the root of this invasion? Russia considers Ukraine within its natural sphere of influence, and it has grown unnerved at Ukraine's closeness with the West and the prospect that the country might join NATO or the European Union. While Ukraine is part of neither, it receives financial and military aid from the United States and Europe.

Get to the root of their fear.

Parents might mistakenly assume that their kids are worried about the same things they are — but often they're not, Dr. Silverman said. "They may have a different frame of reference, perspective or information," she said.

For instance, if your child asks a question like "Is this World War III?" it's best to respond with your own questions so you can understand what's truly worrying them, she said. You could ask: "What do you mean by that?" Or "What specifically is scaring you?"

It could be, for instance, that your child is conjuring up images of past wars and is worried that their community is going to be invaded. Or maybe they're worried that food prices are going to increase, and they'll have nothing to eat.

"Listen up for questions or worries that may indicate any irrational fear about feeling unsafe," Dr. King said.

Appease their concerns while taking them seriously.

Once you've identified what's really worrying your child, address those specific concerns, Dr. Silverman said. But don't respond by telling them to calm down or that they're overreacting. "This can feel dismissive to a child's feelings because kids know that even if *they* are fine, they might feel sad about the circumstances of war, even in a far-off location," Dr. King said.

If your child is worried for families in Ukraine, think about things you could do to help, such as giving to charities that are providing aid. “You often hear the quote from Mr. Rogers, ‘Look for the helpers.’ I like to flip that to ‘How can you be the helper?’” Dr. Silverman said. When kids are given the opportunity to assist others, it gives them a feeling of agency, she said, which can be comforting.

If you don’t have all the answers to your kids’ questions, that’s also fine, Dr. Talib said. “It is OK to say ‘I don’t know’ and that you will seek out an answer and circle back,” she said. “It is also OK to say, ‘This is a big and important topic, let’s talk about it tonight when I can give you my full attention.’” That said, it’s smart to try staying abreast of the news so that you can answer their basic questions.

Remember, too, that the most important thing is for your child to feel secure. “Our primary role, whenever our child is feeling extremely anxious about something that’s happening in the world,” Dr. Silverman said, “is to help them to feel safe and heard.”

Melinda Wenner Moyer is a science journalist and the author of “How To Raise Kids Who Aren’t Assholes.”