

AS THE BLOODY conflict between Russia and Ukraine continues to make headlines, it can cause feelings of anger, worry, anxiety, fear, confusion, sadness, and grief no matter where you live in the world. In times of crisis, children will look to those who are caring for them for a sense of love, connection, security, and safety.

It is important to check in with yourself and any other caregiver to talk about the thoughts, feelings, and activities that may be present in daily life for you and others living in the home. Are you anxious, stressed, upset, irritable, angry, sad, having trouble sleeping, constantly monitoring news on TV or checking social media, going online to binge watch podcasts or audio channels, or having difficulty relating to your primary partner?

Children are capable of picking up on our emotions and watch us closely for “clues” about how to handle things that are scary. These “clues” include your state of being (calm or anxious), emotions, facial expressions, body language, and the way parents/caregivers are relating to each other.

As caregivers, talk together first about how you would like to spend time explaining violence and war to your children. Processing your own thoughts and feelings together beforehand will proactively allow you to create ways that you can approach the topic of violence and war using age-appropriate language at a time and place best suited for each child.

Be aware of what your family is watching. With the average American viewing a little over five hours of TV every day, it is important to monitor how much breaking news and/or graphic details, images, and sounds your family may be exposed to. For children under age eight, remember that even if they are in another room, they still may be able to hear gunfire, bombs dropping, shouting of soldiers, or the crying of someone being interviewed.

Because each member of the family will process these images, sounds, and news reports differently, it is important to check in periodically as a family to determine where news and media exposure may be coming from. For middle school children and teens, they may be exposed to the news at school, with friends, in the community, with other family members, and on social media platforms. How we talk on the phone or in person with family, friends, and others you trust about violence and war also will be noticed by children, so be sure to look around if you want to process your own thoughts and feelings in conversation with someone you know.

Although children may ask to talk with you about this topic while driving, running errands, or doing normal activities in the home, you should have the conversation at a time when they are most able to process the information. For instance, if your child asks on the way to school or at bedtime about graphic images, sounds, or other messages he or she has heard, schedule a time to have the discussion.

When the World's Wars Invade Your Home

BY KELLY BOHNHOFF

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For teens, it may be that you schedule a time outside of the home to grab lunch, walk around the mall, or do research together from reputable sources. You also can plan to watch the news or scroll through social media together as a way to discuss current events.

Because you know your children best, use age-appropriate language and watch their reactions. Keep the information simple, and factual, while sharing what is important to you as a family. Be honest while ensuring that you do not overwhelm them with unnecessary information. Whether young children or teens, it is important to take the time to listen to all questions without blame or judgment while reassuring them that they are loved, safe, and secure.

Concern for the suffering of others is a key component of compassion. When discussing violence and war in the news or on social media, use language that supports and encourages the sharing of positive thoughts, feelings, and

actions to help those around the world who are experiencing suffering and adversity. Approaching this topic with kindness, respect, support, encouragement, compassion, and love for others is the best step for reducing the likelihood of stigmatization and discrimination.

Notice and look for the helpers. Where there is suffering, there are helpers. Finding and sharing positive stories of hope with your children will go a long way to supporting their own unique experience with this topic. Acts of kindness, courage, and peace are available in stories about humanitarian workers, first responders, nurses, doctors, the Red Cross, and other volunteers and organizations mobilizing to help refugees, animals, and families find shelter and safety.

Because children, caregivers, and families can and do hide their thoughts and feelings at times, be on the lookout for subtle signs of distress. For younger children, you may notice



that they regress, become more clingy, tearful, and/or refuse to eat. For teens, you may notice they want to be alone more, are more angry, irritable, and sad than usual, or display a preoccupation with violence and war. For families who are experiencing distress, you may notice more negative communication patterns, dynamics, and interactions among caregivers, between caregivers and children, or among the children themselves. Feeling sad, worried, or scared about world events that include violence and war are a normal part of the human experience. However, when these events cause distress, it is important to reach out for support through family, friends, and other professionals as needed to help the family navigate through any overwhelming sadness or anxiety that is interfering with daily life.

Most children love to help while spending time with their family. Depending on the age of the children, they can participate in activi-

ties that support those affected by violence and war. Families can brainstorm ways that they can help those who may need assistance. For younger children, they can paint, draw, and color pictures. Elementary school children can raise money for charities or send letters of hope to other children or troops serving in the military. High school students could organize a clothing drive or organize peaceful demonstrations. There are many organizations that help provide food, clothing, water, psychological support, medical assistance, and other basic supplies to vulnerable children and refugee families currently in a war zone.

Make family time a priority to discuss how, as a family, each member would like to help those affected by violence and war. Prioritize and schedule those activities. Celebrate the time spent helping others in the world.

Plan to continue to have conversations with your children about the violence and war

currently going on in the world. They will continue to have questions as the situation changes and daily life unfolds.

Talking with children about violence and war is not easy, but as we continue to navigate our way through these uncertain times, we can embrace each other with compassion, hope, and healing. Celebrating our unique gifts with those we love while supporting those who are counting on us to help and support them in a time of crisis is an important step in our evolution to become one sacred family. ★

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