

Guiding Philosophy & Knowledge

“Everyone talks about peace but no one teaches peace. In this world, you are educated for competition, and competition is the beginning of every war. When he will educate himself for cooperation and to offer each other solidarity, that day he will be educating himself for peace.”

- Maria Montessori

Developmental Considerations

Ages 18 months-2 years

- Have more temper tantrums and become more defiant as they try to communicate and be independent
- Start simple pretend play, like imitating what adults or other kids are doing
- Become interested in having other kids around, but are more likely to play alongside them (parallel play) than with them (cooperative play)

Ages 3-4 years

- Start to show and verbalize a wider range of emotion
- Are interested in pretend play, but may confuse real and “make-believe”
- Are spontaneously kind and caring
- Start playing with other kids and separate from caregivers more easily
- May still have tantrums because of changes in routine or not getting what they want

[Understood.org](https://www.understood.org)

The above developmental considerations can help illuminate the best ways to approach hard conversations and big emotions when working with very young children.

Children in these developmental stages are beginning to show interest in others but primarily express this interest through proximity or cooperative play. This means learning experiences that allow children to do similar activities alongside one another or offer intentional opportunities for cooperative play will be more effective than less active or more independent activities.

It's also important to keep in mind that hypothetical situations or speaking about a topic disconnectedly can lead to confusion for children of this age. While their imagination and creativity are blossoming, it can sometimes be hard to distinguish what is real from what simply feels real. However, relatable and age-appropriate analogies can be great tools for helping young children make meaning of ongoing events.

Lastly, adults must be careful not to underestimate young childrens' developing awareness of their own emotions and the humanness of others. Children in these developmental stages can cultivate a rudimentary emotional vocabulary, notice sensations and their related emotions, and learn prosocial skills.

Age-Appropriate Resources for...

Learning About Other Cultures

[▶ Ukraine: Puppets - Travel Kids in Europe](#)

[▶ Russia: Winter - Travel Kids in Asia](#)

[5 Multicultural Activities for Preschoolers to Help Teach the Importance of Diversity](#)

Peacemaking Social Skills

[Empathy-Building Activities](#)

[Emo Dolls \[DIY Dolls that Encourage Empathy through Play\]](#)

[Appreciating Differences Activity](#)

[Speaking Out Against Unfairness](#)

[Kids Can Be Changemakers!](#)

Handling Big Emotions Related to Current Events

[How Stress About the News Effects Kids](#)

[Modeling Emotional Resilience for Kids](#)

[Talking with Preschoolers About Emotions](#)

[Emotion Wheel \(No Images\)](#)

[Emotion Wheel \(With Images\)](#)

[Stomp Out Dino-Sized Emotions](#)

What to Tell Kids about Ukraine: Recommendations from a Psychologist

Children are worried by Russia's attack and need explanations about what is going on, a family counselor says

By [Stella Marie Hombach](#) on March 2, 2022

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has escalated: Russian troops have invaded and now control several areas in Ukraine. Heavy fighting is raging in some cities, and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has declared martial law. This causes fear and worry to many people in Europe, including children and other young people. But how do you answer their questions, and can war be explained at all? In an interview with *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, the German-language edition of *Scientific American*, Torsten Andersohn, a Berlin psychologist and longtime family counselor, argues for an open approach to the topic.

[An edited transcript of the interview follows.]

Russia has attacked Ukraine. The term “Third World War” has already been mentioned in the news. Do I have to talk to my child about it?

I think it makes sense, especially if you are affected by the situation yourself. For example, I worry about the people in Ukraine, but I'm also afraid of what this conflict means for the security and freedom of Europe. So there are a lot of emotions in me, and my child—or, in my case, my grandson—gets all of them. As an adult, I have to take responsibility for this concern that has been triggered in me and bring it up.

So you wouldn't wait for your child to come to you and ask?

If they do, that's great. But no, I wouldn't necessarily wait for that because if the parents are not doing well, because they are worried about world events or even have relatives in Ukraine, and they don't talk about it, tensions arise. Children are quick to relate to this, thinking that they have done something wrong, even taking the blame on themselves and believing that they have to do something so that Mom or Dad will be okay again. We must not burden them with this responsibility. And we should not leave them alone with these tensions.

How can war be put into words that my child understands?

That depends on the age. Young children in particular do not yet have the same moral concepts as adults. They therefore often ask very scientific-like questions and want to understand, first and foremost. Accordingly, it makes sense to enter into a dialogue with the children and answer their questions. In doing so, adults might say, for example, “War is something that destroys life.” I can also explain that, in war, weapons are often used, and houses are broken, and parents are afraid that something might happen to their children. It is also possible to explain war in a playful way,

for example with building blocks. The basic attitude should be the same overall, as with all phenomena that I explain to a child: the greatest possible openness; no lectures but a joint dialogue.

So emotions tend to be left out?

Not necessarily. Authenticity is also part of openness. If I'm pretty scared myself as an adult, I should talk about it. As I said, children are aware of our feelings. It's important that I don't transfer my fear to the child but make it clear: "This scares me, but you don't have to worry about it. You are safe with me." In this way, I make it clear to my child that it is not their responsibility to worry about me. At the same time, I show them that feelings are part of it.

"I am afraid, but you are safe with me"—isn't that ambivalent?

To a certain extent, yes. But we also have to learn to deal with contradictions. It's crucial that we stay in contact. For example, if I'm not sure whether my child understands what I'm explaining or is hiding his or her fear out of consideration for me, it's worth asking, "Did you understand? How do you feel about it?" If they then say that they are not feeling so well or that they wonder how they can make me happy again or help the people in Ukraine, we can think together about what would help in the particular situation.

Do you have an example?

If my child is concerned about the people in Ukraine, we could make a poster, walk to the Russian embassy together or attend a vigil. So I show them ways to take some action and not feel powerless. If a child is afraid, I might ask if they have any ideas about what might help them. Maybe they need a hug, or maybe we build a cave, creating a place where the child feels safe. Being afraid is not a bad thing at first. What is crucial is that we create security for the feeling.

What do you mean by feeling secure?

On the one hand, [this means] the feeling of being seen and understood. On the other hand, [it also refers] to supporting and accompanying the child in their search for a suitable way of dealing with things.

The security of the child's feelings is enhanced through the interaction with an adult?

Absolutely. The worst thing is when children are afraid, feel threatened, maybe even experience violence and are left alone with it—or if maybe it's not even talked about. If that's the case, the psyche is easily damaged.

What should parents do when they are overwhelmed by their own worries or can't even get out of their anxiety spiral?

[They should] seek help, for example from a friend or parenting counselor. If my child asks a question, and I don't know the answer or feel overwhelmed, I can also say that I need a moment to

think about it. It's just important not to drop the subject then but to bring it up again later. Sometimes the child also needs a corrective.

What do you mean by that?

As a family therapist, I once met a six-year-old boy. He assumed that guns would protect him from his fear. I then explained to him that you can't shoot away fear but that guns usually lead to even more fear. In the end, we thought together about what else could help him with anxiety.

How do I talk to adolescents about war?

Openly, maturely and ideally with the opportunity for discussion. Puberty in particular is about breaking away from parents and finding one's own values and developing an attitude for oneself. In this process, adolescents also examine whether the views that parents or other important caregivers have conveyed to them are coherent for them. By sharing their views with them and leaving room for contradiction, parents help them to form their own opinions. In this way, young people can also locate themselves in the world to a certain extent—and that gives them stability.

In addition to fear, there is also anger. How do I deal with it when my 14-year-old son thinks he has to arm himself and fight against Russia now?

First of all, I have to take the feeling seriously and not dismiss it as a childish or adolescent fantasy. The desire behind it, namely to protect others, is understandable. Then it's a matter of discussion: What do you want to do? Who is this supposed to help? I can also sharpen my arguments and ask what my son wants to do about bombs and tanks. Like fear, anger also needs to be contained—that is, I show my child that I understand them and that they are not alone with his anger and frustration.

How do you deal with children and young people now being inundated with images, videos and reports about the war on social networks?

This shows once again how necessary it is to have a conversation about the current situation. We cannot shield children and young people from reality under an artificial glass bell. In terms of interaction, I can ask the child where they are finding out about the war, what is being shown on Facebook and TikTok and if they have any questions about it. If I'm worried that they can't handle what's on their screen, I would ask how they are doing with it.

So we need to keep talking to our kids?

Absolutely. And we should realize that we don't have to protect them from difficult feelings. We just must not leave them alone with them.

How to talk to your children about the Ukraine/Russia conflict

Two child psychologists share their tips

LAST MODIFIED ON MAR 02, 2022 16:02 GMT | [SOPHIE HAMILTON](#)

Parents up and down the UK, and indeed the world, will likely be facing similar questions at home from their [children](#) right now concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Questions like: What is the war about? Why are Russia and Ukraine fighting? I'm scared there will be war in our country, will that happen? Is this the start of World War Three?

These are questions none of us expected to have to answer and may not have a good reply for. Naturally, we want to protect our children from the horrors happening in Ukraine but we also have a duty as [parents](#) to educate them about the realities of life.

So what do we say to our kids about the conflict? What information should we give them and how much information is too much? There's a fine line between educating and frightening children in this situation, and a big difference in what you tell a five-year-old to a 12-year-old.

HELLO! spoke to two experts for their advice: Leading Child Psychologist [Dr Alison McClymont](#) and Dr Jane Gilmour, Consultant Clinical Psychologist Great Ormond Street Hospital and co-author of *How to Have Incredible Conversations With Your Child* and *The Incredible Teenage Brain*.

Read their suggestions below...

How can I explain the Russia-Ukraine conflict to my child?

Dr Jane Gilmour says: "Be honest. In times of uncertainty, it's never more important for your child to have a strong, secure and trusting relationship with you. If you tell your child something that is not true, it may harm your relationship and their sense of stability.

"Acknowledge that this is a serious event but many countries are working together to figure out what to do. Point out that day to day life for your child will be the same. And of course, show empathy for the families that are currently vulnerable and under threat.

"If your child asks a question, you might be tempted to bat it away and say, 'Don't worry about that'. Be sure you answer it, otherwise, your child might fill the knowledge gap with worries (often inaccurate or extremely unlikely scenarios), information from another child or even social media. Their questions are your chance to help them understand the world's events in a safe, calm and measured environment.

"Particularly in the early stages of this situation, ask: 'What do you want to know?' rather than assume you know what is on their mind. Some children may worry their school will be closed (remember their recent experiences during the pandemic), while others might be wondering what the word 'sanction' means."

How does this differ according to their age?

Dr Jane Gilmour says: "Young children need their information delivered in simple and concrete terms. Use an analogy that is recognisable in their world (for example, if someone takes something that doesn't belong to them, it's not OK). Even the very youngest of children - and indeed infants - pick up ideas and emotions even if they haven't got the language to talk about it and offering them a framework will help them make sense of it."

"Teenagers' brains are wired to find out things for themselves (rather than be told) so direct them to accurate information sources and then make time to talk it through. Part of their brain development includes a drive to test boundaries so don't be surprised if they put forward controversial ideas. Don't shut them down, but instead offer 'a sorting space' to help them figure out what they think or feel. Remember listening is not the same as agreeing."

Dr Alison McClymont adds: "If your child has questions, answer them factually and succinctly. It is not a point to educate them on the moralities of war if they are under 10. If they are older, you can discuss it in terms of the complexities of war, ie neither side wins and both countries will see a senseless loss of life."

What should my child read or watch to get age-appropriate information without being too frightened?

Dr Jane Gilmour says: "Depending on the age of your child, remind them that news reports are only a small slice of a very big cake - the world is generally a safe place."

Watch this [Newsround report](#) yourself first to check you are happy with the content, then watch it with your child. There is quite a lot to take in for younger kids, so stop it now and again and ask an open question like: "What do you think about that?"

As for reading material, Dr Alison McClymont says: "I would strongly recommend not giving any reading material to a child on war, as a child's moral centre (the prefrontal cortex) is not formed until their early twenties and discussing many of these subjects of violent or mass murder is simply too overwhelming."

"It is ok, for example, to show on a map where Ukraine is located, it is also ok for them to read about the country and its culture, even its history with Russia. But no reading material should focus on conflict or war."

How can I reassure my child if they are scared about the war? How can I make them feel safe?

Dr Alison McClymont says: "The reality is your child might feel very frightened depending on what information they have absorbed. It is key to get them to articulate their fears so that you can rationalise them, i.e. it is not likely the UK will be subject to a nuclear threat. It is also important to get them to explain how they feel and where in their body they are feeling this."

Dr Jane Gilmour advises: "If you convey the idea that you feel safe with your words and actions, then so will they. The way that you act and talk about the situation will strongly influence your child's sense of danger about it. The single most powerful thing that you can do in times of uncertainty - particularly with anxious children - is to telegraph calm."

"Consider what you are saying when you are around them (think about the 'parent chat' at the school gates). Snippets overheard though not directed at your child are often just as influential. Endless reassuring statements from parents ('don't worry') are likely counterproductive. Evidence shows that calm, practical and open discussions while maintaining all your family's usual routines is the most effective way to make children feel safe."

Should we refrain from having TV or radio news reports on when children are around?

Dr Alison McClymont says: "Definitely. Without context and the adult brain to understand human actions such as war, hearing snippets of information from the radio or news can be incredibly traumatic to a child. They may have nightmares or suffer from anxiety from having the information suddenly invade their TV or car radio without warning or context."

Dr Jane Gilmour also advises: "Be aware of the news they hear. If news aimed at adults is overheard by your child, don't hide it, or hurriedly switch it off when they appear because that sends a message that the news is somehow secret or even dangerous. Keep an ear out for what they are hearing, then explain and translate it into terms that are understandable and less threatening."

With older children or teenagers who want to watch the news a lot, Jane suggests: "In the case of anxious and obsessive news consumption, watch the news together, limit it to once a day and afterwards ask what they took from it so you can check what they heard."

How to help children who are 'silent worriers'

Dr Jane Gilmour says: "This tip is a good one for family life whatever the circumstances, but particularly useful for kids that don't often discuss their feelings or anxious children."

"Make a regular check-in time every day. Ask your child to record questions or worries that pop up during the day (write, draw or make an audio recording) and save them up to discuss later at your check-in. If they have many questions, agree on a time limit for your check-in and come back to these at the next check-in time and so on."

"This has two positive effects: first, recording thoughts 'outside our head' sometimes offers a different perspective, and second, even quite young children may notice a difference between intense feelings 'in the moment' and worries feeling less intense after they are 'parked' for a bit. "Both skills need regular practice and they won't develop fully until late adolescence but they are incredible wellbeing habits."