

# How to talk to young children in relation to war

By Tamsin Grimmer, Early Years Director of Linden Learning.

It is difficult to know if and how we should discuss war with young children. Should we try to shelter them from the situation by avoiding talking about it or should we talk about it in a manner which our young children will understand?

**Tamsin Grimmer** shares her ideas about how parents/carers and educators of young children can respond in relation to war.

Recent events have reminded me of times from my own childhood. Growing up during the cold war, I remember hearing about the hostility between the then Soviet Union and the USA in particular and lying in bed at night worrying about the things I'd heard. In my limited understanding of the situation I often lived in fear.

We have all been shocked, horrified and upset by the devastating news images and stories coming out of Ukraine. Many children will be feeling frightened, anxious and they may feel it will have a direct impact on their lives. Even our youngest children will probably have picked up on this, heard adults discuss the events or seen images on the television or social media. There will, however, be some children who do not know about the conflict and we need to be sensitive to the differing levels of information they will have heard.

As a starting point it would be a good idea to find out what, if anything, they know about the conflict. We can do this through observing our children, noticing their behaviour and noting any changes, listening to their conversations and questions and working out how they feel and what level of information they have about the situation. Children need love and reassurance, they need to feel safe and secure with us, therefore hearing stories about war will be unsettling and frightening, regardless of their level of understanding.



War is a difficult concept for young children to understand

War is a very difficult concept for children to understand and the reasons why countries go to war are even more difficult. It is important to remember that there will be groups of children who may be extra vulnerable at this time, for example, children who have already experienced trauma, children who are refugees or children who have lived experiences of violence and fighting. In addition, many children will have family members who live in Russia or Ukraine or neighbouring countries. These are the

children for which this conflict will have a direct impact, and we must ensure we remain sensitive to this at all times.

It is really important that we practice compassion and are careful how we discuss the role of the Russians. We may have Russian children or children with families in Russia as well as Ukraine. There is enough hate in the world already, our role is to love, be compassionate to everyone, and help our children feel safe and secure with us. Ensure our comments do not add to hate-speech or discriminate against one group or another.

Lastly, find a practical way to respond to this crisis. As a setting, can you fund-raise for charities working in countries involved in conflicts, or write letters to your local councillors? Perhaps they can create an image about peace which can be displayed in your setting or shared with any local organisations with links in Eastern Europe or Russia.

If you have found this leaflet useful, please do get in touch.

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- ✓ Listen to children and answer questions honestly, using terms that are factual, portray information and avoid the potential for misunderstandings or stereotyping.
- ✓ Use correct language whilst remembering their age and stage of development, e.g. war, fighting, dead etc.
- ✓ Do not add to children's anxiety and fears by listening to the news with the children present or talking to colleagues about the situation in their earshot. If children initiate a conversation about it, then respond in language they will understand.
- ✓ Reassure children that they are safe - they rely on us for their feelings of safety and security. Therefore do not belittle their concerns but instead acknowledge children's feelings and accept all emotions.
- ✓ Ensure that changes in your home/setting are kept to a minimum. Familiar surroundings can help a child to remain feeling safe and secure.
- ✓ Don't worry if children ask the same questions over and over again. They are trying to reassure themselves and we must answer consistently to offer reassurance.
- ✓ Remain calm when discussing conflict—if you are feeling frightened yourself, this will come across through the discussion.
- ✓ If children use playful interactions to explore war and express their feelings, support this and use them as opportunities to discuss difficult concepts like death, remembering that young children do not yet have a full understanding this.
- ✓ Share stories in which a character is involved in war or fighting or provide opportunities for children to create stories and have their own narrative about it. Ensure these stories do not add to children's worries but alleviate concerns.
- ✓ Check in with children regularly and monitor their levels of wellbeing and anxiety. Remember that children's behaviour may regress after experiencing trauma, We must offer understanding, reassurance and security at this time and not chastise these behaviours. They will pass with time as the child feels more safe and secure.

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