

SHOULD WE TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT THE WAR?



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Who are we:

HumanDoc Foundation is a Polish non-governmental organisation dealing with development and humanitarian aid, and conducting educational and social projects. We have completed over 50 projects in more than a dozen countries around the world. Since 2015, we have been active in Ukraine. After the outbreak of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2-15, we ran a Support and Integration Centre for conflict victims in the city of Kharkiv. Tens of thousands of people benefited from our support.

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Since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, HumanDoc Foundation has been organising evacuation actions of people from threatened areas and at the same time delivering humanitarian and medical aid to many cities in Ukraine (Mariupol, Kiev, Donetsk, Zaporozhye) and providing comprehensive care for Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

Of course – yes. However, it is very important to adjust information to children's age. If the communication is not adequate to their cognitive and development skills, it could contribute to the increase in stress level and to the occurrence of multiple adverse reactions.

Let's remember that life of children fleeing the war and the life of their loved ones was at risk. Many of them are still frightened and they don't know, what to expect, so they have lots of questions.

In this situation, in order to help their parents, families, care givers to face this overwhelming task of reacting to these fears and worries, we are presenting below some tips, which will let you adjust your communication to the capabilities of a young person.

1. FIND THE TIME TO LISTEN

Give children space to talk whenever they need to – even if you are in the middle of something else. Encourage them to tell you, what they already know, how they feel about it and to ask questions.

2. ADJUST YOUR COMMUNICATION TO THE CHILD'S AGE

Older children will need to hear more details, while for the younger it could be enough to hear that sometimes it happens that there are a lot of misunderstandings between two countries and then, they fight each other.

Stay calm and answer honestly the child's questions. Start from simple information – too many details can be overwhelming and can make them anxious.

3. TELL THE CHILD THAT THEIR FEELINGS MATTER

Talk to the child about their feelings. Ask about them. It's important that they feel support and that they know that their feelings are normal and that they have every right to their feelings and anxiety. They shouldn't feel judged or rejected.

When children are given the possibility to have an open and honest conversation about things that are bothering them, they might feel some relief.

4. CALM THE CHILD DOWN

Tell them that what is happening is not a problem to be solved by children – it's adults all over the world who are working hard on that. So, they shouldn't feel guilty if they play, meet with their friends or do other things that make them happy.

5. ENCOURAGE OLDER CHILDREN TO OFFER PRACTICAL HELP

They could for example prepare drawings about world peace, help pack and collect things for the refugees, participate in workshops for children from Ukraine. Children, who have the opportunity to bring help, instead of feeling helpless, become a part of community, which is working together to solve the conflict.

How to behave and talk to children depending on their age?

0-3 years old

- Take care of your feelings. Apply your own methods for coping with stress. Take care of yourself.
- Children sense their parents' emotions well – their anxiety, nervousness. At this point, there is no need to inform them about the war in the world. An exception might be the moment, when a child sees TV broadcast or hears some news on the radio: then, you need to tell them with a calm voice, using simple words, what situation is actually taking place (without going too far into details, without scaring them or telling them about people's tragedy).

4-7 years old

- Talk to the child about the events from the world in a calm way, without going too far into details, without scaring them and telling them about people's tragedy.
- Give them very short communication informing about the situation.
- Take care of the child's emotions.
- Answer all their questions. Reassure the child that they can ask about anything.
- Stay calm and take care of yourself to be strong enough to take care of the emotions of the child.
- Show them warmth and affection, hug them during the conversation, give them love and support.

8-10 years old

- It's important to be open to the child's questions about the difficult events. The child decides, how much they want to know.
- Inform the child about the specifics, you can explain the reason of the current situation. Remember not to introduce fear and anxiety.
- Support, help, give them the sense of warmth and safety.
- Stay calm and take care about yourself and your emotions to be strong enough to take care of the emotions of the child.

11-18 years old

- Make sure that the conversation is calm. Tell about the situation in the world, give historical context, talk about the cause-and-effect relationship.
- Give them specific and verified information.
- Be open to questions. Try to answer each of them.
- Offer help if the child feels the need to support refugees.
- Take care of that need and of emotions of the young person. Ask what they need.

LET'S REMEMBER!

For our children we are the experts. We, as parents or teachers, feel what information and in what way should be communicated to children. Also, children are the best experts than themselves. Because of this, it's a good idea to offer them the possibility to take care of their needs by being calm and open to their curiosity. There are no wrong questions or wrong emotions.

We should assume good intentions in each action taken by a child. Most often they result from the need to satisfy their curiosity. Young people want to have the sense of causality. We should support them and show on our example real solutions.

What's most important, children need to feel sure that the adults will do everything in their power to ensure their safety. It's also a good idea to tell them that they can offer support to friends or neighbours from Ukraine, who might feel overwhelmed.

While talking to a child, we show them that we are willing and open for discussion, even in those difficult times. This might help lay foundations for a dialogue about difficult topics.

Our children are not the first generation of young people that grows up in the times of war and disturbing events around the world. The way of obtaining information, however, is new. It's important that children receive information from calm adults that they trust and that they have the possibility to understand how they might feel when difficult situations occur.

Crisis intervention

In emergency situations, i.e., when we notice a strong somatic reaction in a child or ourselves, we should turn for help.

In case of an emergency, e.g., suicidal thoughts, or desire to harm ourselves or agitation, we should call an ambulance.

In case of long-term sadness, apathy, sense of resignation, lack of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable, we should contact a psychologist or psychiatrist to receive help.

Methods and styles of coping with stress situations

Istnieją trzy główne sposoby radzenia sobie z uczuciami naszymi i naszych dzieci. Albo je tłumimy i minimalizujemy, albo zdajemy się całkowicie na ich łaskę i maksymalizujemy je, albo uznajemy je i zatrzymujemy. Nie będzie na pewno zaskoczeniem, że uznanie uczuć i zatrzymanie ich jest najlepszym sposobem na poradzenie sobie w trudnym momencie. Open and honest dialogue with children will help them express how they feel. The more they can say, the less probable it is that their anxiety will display as stomach aches and/or unwanted behaviours. We shouldn't say "we are all doomed, apocalypse is imminent". It's not a good idea to convince them that everything is okay, either. We should acknowledge that there is a reason to worry and it's fully understandable if they feel this way.

It's natural that we want our children to be happy all the time. However, if we try to suppress their feelings, which we find negative, such as panic or worry, we make them invalid. We need to take time and hear them out, trying to normalize these emotions. Our task is to make these feelings credible and accepting, not ignoring, them. This happens when we tell our children that they shouldn't worry. Instead, we should tell them: "it's natural that you feel afraid. I'm here for you if you want to talk."

The best thing we all can do if we are not in the war zone is to appreciate relative peace. Despite the tragic events that we hear about, we should take time and notice what is good, e.g., taking common actions, bringing support, the number of people ready to help. Creating good memories for children is an investment in their future ability to feel happy.

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HOW CAN YOU HELP?

