



It used to be that when global disasters or world-changing events happened, parents could turn off the radio or TV, or hide the newspaper to shield their children from the sometimes harsh realities of the world. But these days, entrenched as we are in the 24-hour news cycle and the infiltration of social media into every aspect of our lives, information – and misinformation – is more readily available than at any other point in history. This means simply changing the channel on the telly is no longer the effective avoidance tactic it once was. Disturbing images from the Russia-Ukraine conflict are filling our news feeds at the moment, but with ongoing crises in Syria, Palestine and around the world, there comes a time when every child will have questions. “Young adults can understand the complexity [of war and conflict] and will surely have their opinions. It is important to help them process the information by discussing it,” says Dr Ola Pykhtina, a psychologist at Thrive Well-being Centre. “They need some space to voice their thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes. We, as parents, need to help them navigate overwhelming information.” Many parents will be familiar with the conundrum of whether it’s best to raise issues or wait until their child brings them up. “When you are not sure whether to raise the subject [of global conflicts] with your child, watch them play and speak,” says Dr Pykhtina. “Just observing how much they

know already and what their ideas are can help make the conversation more context-appropriate for your child. “When it comes to young adults, it is also important to observe their emotional reactions to the news and their communication with friends. It can be helpful to ask, ‘What do you think? How do you see it?’ And have that conversation with them based on their initial understanding of the situation.” In other words, parents who are wary of raising certain topics may find it easier to take a more roundabout route by asking their child what they already know about the situation. In this way, parents can gauge the extent of their child’s knowledge and provide an opening for continued discussion. They can also listen, assuage fears and correct any misinformation or misinterpretation. The UN children’s fund suggests parents remain mindful of when they raise discussion points, with a comfortable setting such as a family dinner preferable to just before bedtime. “We don’t usually explain why the war is going on, mostly we discuss the human impact, the effect of the war on people,” says Lubaba Al Dajani, a Dubai department administrator and mother of one. Born in the UAE, where she and her husband are raising their son, 9, Al Dajani says her grandparents left Palestine and she has been careful to introduce information about its heritage and history to her child slowly. “He will not really understand the real cost of this war,

# FOR YOUR INFORMATION

► With children being exposed to potentially disturbing news and images, **Gemma White** asks the experts what parents can do to reduce anxiety and talk about conflict

why it has happened and how it started,” she says. “At the same time, we don’t want to give him information that might not be for his age. So instead, we talk about how the war is affecting people and the disasters that war can cause.” Steering the conversation to focus on feelings, as well as kindness and human resilience, can help to counter a child’s feelings of anxiety or helplessness amid the flood of news. Parents can discuss the roles of first responders and charities in conflict. They can also point out stories concerning acts of cross-cultural kindness and collaboration, as well as discussions about the roles of those who are trying to

mediate, as opposed to focusing on the aggressors. “It is important to name your feelings and reassure the child that many people are looking for a solution,” says Dr Pykhtina. “You may say something like, ‘I feel worried because people get hurt, but I know everyone is working very hard to find a way out and make things better.’ You can also take this as an opportunity to teach your child the concept of peace and a peaceful world where people of different nationalities and belief systems live together in a safe world.” Dr Jeanina, consultant psychologist and founder of Blue Lights Wellness, says: “Focus on kindness and compassion. If your child wants to help, this could be something to look into together, such as local registered charities in the UAE who need support through donations of clothes, health-care items and even toys they are willing to donate.” If your children frequently use social media, it’s unlikely they have escaped talk of global conflicts. It’s important for parents to be aware of the sites or platforms their

children are visiting and to monitor the situation to either limit or oversee their online access. “Due to our social media age and exposure online to the news, children can be more prone to seek answers and reassurance, and turn to their parents as a first line,” says Dr Jeanina. “Some children are quieter, thus it would be beneficial to continue to check in with them if anything is on their mind, being discussed at school or with peers.” While experts are in agreement that children and young adults have a right to learn what’s going on in the world around them, it’s up to parents to ensure information is age-appropriate.

Steering the conversation to focus on feelings can help to counter a child’s feelings of anxiety



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"It is important to be open and transparent with children from a young age as this builds the basis of a trusting and stable relationship," says Mandeep Jassal, a behavioural therapist at Priory Wellbeing Centre, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. "However, parents should be mindful to prevent scare-mongering by the language they use to prevent triggering possible anxiety. Parents can discuss war and conflict and also ask their child how this makes them feel without negating their experience."

Age-appropriate language to discuss global events aside, younger children might be encouraged to draw their feelings if they are unable to express them verbally.

It's also important to acknowledge that children take in much more than simply what their parents say, with facial expressions and body language being giveaways of mum and dad's feelings on a certain subject.

"Very often, we adults forget that we are being watched by our children constantly," says Dr Pykhtina. "It means that they not only observe what is going on in the world, but also observe our reactions to it even when we don't realise it, especially when we don't realise it."

A parent's instinct is to shield children from negativity and bad news as a way of protecting them. While this will work for young children, those who are older, and young adults, will be exposed to news and information that cannot always be filtered through parental oversight.

"There is hardly any way to prepare children for the fact that there are going to be

things happening out of their control," says Dr Pykhtina. "On the contrary, they need from us as much certainty and safety as we can provide. What could be done, though, is to build their resilience in the face of uncertainty."

Feelings around loss of control, not only in their immediate environment, but also their place in the world, can lead to increased feelings of anxiety in children.

"Focus on their strengths and encourage problem-solving skills," says Dr Pykhtina. "Model how to cope with emotions and never, ever giving up in any situation, no matter how difficult and hopeless it could seem. We need to teach children with our own example that the human spirit, determination and unity can change any circumstances."

When discussing conflict, parents should try to avoid using labels such as "bad people" or "good people" to avoid creating prejudice. They should remind them that countries are made up of different people and that a nation's leadership does not necessarily reflect the beliefs of the population.

"With our world always going through a continuum of wars, sadness, grief and even pandemics, there is not one straightforward solution to prepare your child, other than being available for them, listening, observing changes in behaviour," says Dr Jeanina.

"Remind them that as parents, you are there to nurture, love and keep them safe. And parents themselves need to keep in mind that you are not expected to have all the answers."