

How to talk to children about Russia invading Ukraine in an honest but reassuring way

Hearing about the news can be confusing and scary for children. I asked experts how to tackle their questions about the conflict

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War is difficult enough for most adults to fathom but for children reading about Ukraine online or hearing about it in the playground, it can be confusing and scary. And for parents and grandparents, it can be difficult to know how to deal with their questions and worries.

I asked Charlie Lewis, a professor of family and developmental psychology at the University of Lancaster, and Megan Wright, a family support worker with the charity Action for Children, how to talk to children about what is going on in eastern Europe.

Be honest

“Children have to know above all else they can trust their parents,” says Wright. “It can be stressful for a child if you have told them one thing and they later find out that it’s not true.”

Teenagers are likely to know a lot already, so discussing it is important. “Spend time talking to them about Ukraine,” says Lewis, “Because with so much social media and online presence, it is also good to talk about different perspectives and narratives, too, and checking for misinformation. Use facts to your advantage.”

‘Children have to know above all else they can trust their parents’ (Photo: Ippei & Janine Naoi/Getty)

Wright says: “With younger children who want to know more, look at a map with them and show them where the countries are. If they have been on holiday to Europe you could say ‘remember how long it took us to get to France? This place is even further’ to make them feel a little safer.

“Reassure them that you are going to keep them safe, and that there are countries trying to step in and help. It is possible to be hopeful without diminishing events.”

Try to seem calm even if you don’t feel it

Children often look to their parents for pointers as to how they should feel. “Model calmness,” suggests Wright, “but it’s also fine to say, ‘I’m a bit worried too, shall we go on a walk together?’.” It’s also OK not to know everything.

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Lewis agrees, saying: “None of us have all the answers, so you don’t need to pretend that you do.” Be aware of overhearing – anyone who spends time with children knows that they are master eavesdroppers, and their young ears pick things up from the next room without even trying.

“Think about how you are talking about the situation to other adults or on the phone,” says Wright, “so that you are not saying one thing to them, and saying something very different in the next room. That is more worrying for children.”

Listen to children

Lewis believes it is imperative to listen to what children think about what’s going on, and how they feel about it. He adds: “If they seem upset, don’t try to distract them or fob them off.”

For younger children who seem disconcerted, you should give them a chance to express how they feel. “Set a few minutes aside around an hour before bed for ‘worry time’,” advises Wright. “Ask them how they are feeling, and if they are worried about anything. Then they can get things off their chest before they go to sleep.”

Don’t bring it up if children seem uninterested.

Some children will be fascinated by the Ukraine conflict and want to know more, some will be worried, but others may show no interest at all – and that’s fine. It depends entirely on the child.

“My three-year-old grandson was chatting over the news today about something completely different, so I’m not going to be talking to him about it,” says Lewis. “But a child of five or six may well have a sense that something is wrong.”

“It’s about judging your child’s interest and responding to that,” agrees Wright. “Children will normally give you a hint if something is bothering them.”

Maintaining normality helps children feel secure

They think, “well, if I’m going to school, and doing my swimming lesson at the same time each week, things can’t be that bad”. Children respond to order at home, even if the outside world feels chaotic.