

Talking to Children and Youth about Violent Conflict and War

The following tips are based on the literature and conversations with the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health.

For School Staff

Regional instability and violence, such as armed conflict, attacks, or war, evoke a lot of emotions and stress, including but not limited to fear, uncertainty, anxiety, anger, frustration, and confusion. For some individuals, families, and communities it may be a particularly distressing time and topic. As such, it is important to be mindful of the children/youth and staff in your schools who may be particularly affected by regional violence or war.

Possible examples include:

- Families, friends, and those with close ties (i.e., personal, cultural, religious) to the region in conflict
- Families, friends, and those with close connections to anyone on either side of the conflict
- Those with family and friends in bordering countries
- Military families and friends
- Immigrant families who have experienced regional violence or war
- Families experiencing poverty or economic challenges and stress
- Those with past traumatic experiences and those who are feeling the cumulative impact of multiple stressors and difficult events
- Adults, children, and youth with anxiety or other mental health needs

Children and youth may receive a lot of information, graphic information, and possible misinformation, about the situation via peers, the media, and social media. As such, it is helpful to act as a buffer to misinformation and provide accurate, age-appropriate information, support, and guidance as a trusted adult in their lives. Here are some tips for talking to children and youth about this (or any other difficult or distressing) topic:

1. Plan ahead how to respond to related comments, questions or discussions in class. Provide honest, short, age-appropriate responses and offer support.
2. A lot of younger children will not know about the situation and that's okay. There is no need to introduce this topic to children who are not impacted by it. If a young child does know about it and they are worried, you can have a conversation with them to reassure them that they are safe. Find out what they already know and encourage questions. You can then respond in an

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age-appropriate way. The aim is to limit upsetting or unnecessary details and to protect them from misinformation or a misunderstanding of what's happening.

3. For some kids their response to scary or overwhelming events won't look like fear or grief, it might look like distraction, aggression, anxiety, helplessness, stomach aches, confusion, hyperactivity, impulsivity, etc. Students with past lived experience in conflict or war zones may have heightened stress or behaviours at this time. Consider adapting typical consequences for student behaviour. Help students to regulate with exercises (e.g., breathing, grounding, yoga) or regulation items (e.g., colouring pages, fidgets, a ball), and choose positive coping strategies. The aim is to help them feel supported in a safe environment.
4. Do not make presumptions about how children and youth are feeling or thinking about the situation. Ask children who know about the situation how they are feeling about it and respond to the concerns they share. Validate whatever they are feeling and let them know support is available if needed. Checking in as things evolve lets children know you are open to talking about difficult situations.
5. Gather your information from trusted news sources. If a student asks a question that you cannot answer, it is okay to tell them you do not know and/or look up the answer if applicable.
6. Help students identify any assumptions they may have about others based on their nationality, place of birth, religion or languages spoken. School staff should ensure that all children are being treated with respect.
7. Refrain from showing any media or social media coverage of the conflict or war at school. It's impossible to know how all children and youth will feel and react.
8. Encourage everyone to take breaks from following media and social media coverage.
9. Monitor adult conversations discussing the conflict/war in front of younger children. Monitor your tone, as children will pick up on it. Be as calm as possible when discussing the conflict/war and use language that children can understand. Monitor conversations about graphic content and the social, political, and economic impacts in front of children.
10. Promote resilience through increasing connection, emphasizing the helpers, keeping routines, and offering patience and attunement.
11. Encourage children and youth to access their support networks or resources in their community. Some children/youth may want to contribute to local community support and resiliency efforts and activities. This can help restore a sense of community, resiliency, purpose, and control. Most children will be able to cope with the support and understanding of their caregivers, family, teachers, coaches, and community members. However, some may

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have difficulties that are continuing and may need further help from a school counsellor or other mental health provider. Please support children and youth in accessing help as needed.

12. Plan ahead and be aware of supports available to those who may be particularly impacted.

For more information on common age-specific trauma reactions among children and youth:

- https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf

The tips listed above are based on:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's (NCTSN) document 'Talking to Children about War'
 - <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/talking-to-children-about-war.pdf>
- Past resources developed by the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health for helping children and youth cope with traumatic events
 - <https://iwkhealth.ca/about/trauma-informed-care>

Need help now?

Emergency: 911

Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line: 1-888-429-8167*

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868*

*These hotlines are toll-free. In an emergency, you can also go to your closest emergency department.

Need mental health and addictions services?

IWK & NSH Mental Health and Addictions Central Intake: 1-855-922-1122*

*Self-referral