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How to talk to children about

Leading parenting experts tell Anna Maxted what to say about Ukraine

Professor Tanya Byron

How do we explain the war in Ukraine to our children? If they're seeing brutal images of war on TV and social media, listening to the news on your radio or to what friends say at school, it's likely that they'll feel concerned and anxious. The chartered clinical psychologist Professor Tanya Byron, who specialises in working with children and adolescents, says we should see their reaction in the context of the past two years.

"The pandemic was a very uncertain time, which affected children an awful lot," she says. "War is the ultimate in uncertainty and it's important to think about how children might make links between the two. 'Does the situation in the Ukraine mean that schools will close down again? Will I be forced to stop seeing my friends again?' The world can seem very unsafe at the moment."

How can we help them to try to make sense of it? Here, leading experts explain how we can talk to children of all ages about the war.

Children of all ages take their parents' lead

Our expression and our body language as well as our words betray our anxiety level, so we need to manage our own emotions. "Our job is to be calm, not distracted, and in control," Byron says. "If we are calm and in control, our children will take our lead."

Managing our anxiety is important, adds Dr Angharad Rudkin, a clinical psychologist and co-author of *Split Survival Kit*, because in this situation our child looks to us like a nervous flyer looks to the cabin crew. "You become hypervigilant of the air stewards. If they look OK then you feel OK. But as soon as they start looking anxious, your anxiety can increase."

How can we explain things to primary school-age kids

The chances are, through school, friends or the car radio, children will have realised something is going on, says Rudkin — but if they haven't, don't mention it. "If you've got a seven-year-old who doesn't know about Russia and Ukraine, I'd leave it at that. Only talk about it if they bring it up." If they do bring it up? Byron says: "For very little children don't say too much, but you can explain to them that it is not OK to take something that doesn't belong to you, and it is very upsetting for people when somebody tries to do that."

Dr Shadi Shahnavaz, the head of family therapy at the Soke private wellness clinic, suggests explaining that this is about one man, and if small children ask why he's doing this, "You could say, 'He's very angry because he feels Ukraine should belong to Russia — it used to be in the Soviet Union — and it's as if he wants to take a toy back.' A helpful comparison, she says, is that the other countries are like teachers and other adults saying: "No, you can't take the toy back, let's find another solution."

Being honest will help your child (of any age) feel more secure

Don't avoid the conversation, Shahnavaz says: "I've seen a lot of parents say, 'Let's talk about nice things, let's not talk about that for now.' It creates anxiety in a child because then it becomes something so terrible you can't even talk about it." Give as little or much detail as is age-appropriate but don't brush it off.

A secure, trusting relationship with you helps children to feel safe, says Dr Jane Gilmour, consultant clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital. If you lie to them, "it could harm your relationship and their sense of stability. Be honest. Acknowledge this is a serious event — but the countries are working together to work out what to do. You're not minimising the seriousness of it, you're also telegraphing calm. Children, whether 2 or 22, look to adults as to how they should consider danger in the world."

Ask children what they've heard, to build the conversation

What if a child expresses a fear? Byron says: "Whenever they ask you a question, say, 'What have you heard?' This way you can make sure you know what's behind what they are asking, what is giving them these fears."

> "No question, however difficult or controversial, should be off limits

"Ask, 'What do you think is going on?'" Rudkin adds. "Then you can build your conversation from their understanding." You might also ask, "What do you want to know?" Gilmour says. But keep the first conversation short. If they want you can talk about this daily (but not endlessly, which can increase anxiety) — but don't overwhelm them.

Be the gatekeeper of news at home with primary-age children (and sensitive teenagers)

With younger children it's best not to leave newspapers lying around, Byron says — "Some can use very distressing images." And watch what you say in their presence. "Be careful about them overhearing your conversations as they will absorb it, but not necessarily absorb the correct information." Too often we think children ignore Radio 4 or our TV news — wrong, Shahnavaz says. "When you pick them up from school, you could turn your radio off or to a station that only plays music. A lot of parents think, 'My child doesn't listen.' They listen. They're very aware. Make sure the TV isn't on all the time."

Most of our news is designed for an adult audience, Rudkin notes. "Children tend to be quite visual, so when they see an image it's hard for them to unsee it. I would turn off the news when preteen kids are around — and if you've got an anxious teen." But if it is on and they're listening, discuss it, Shahnavaz says. "How did you understand what was just said? What are your feelings about it?"

Keep an eye out for misinformation

Gilmour says: "Teenagers are wired to find things out for themselves, so they may be more inclined to look to other sources." Byron suggests we check in daily with them. "We need to check the reliability of their sources. Make sure that you point them to BBC News and other reliable sources of information. Make sure that they know that they can tell you what they have seen or read without getting into trouble."

What if you suspect your child is brooding but isn't talking? If your child internalises worries, Byron suggests a time each day where you talk as a family, for example at supper. "Say, 'Has anyone mentioned anything that is happening in the world at the moment? How does it make you feel?' "

Never say, 'Don't worry'

What if your child is upset or scared by what they've seen? Byron says: "Validate their feelings, normalise their feelings. Tell them that everyone gets nervous and everyone gets scared. Never, ever say, 'Don't worry.'" And if younger children share feelings about anxieties, she says, "Get them to name their feelings and where the feelings are. Are they in their tummy or going around their head?" Encourage them to be specific, Gilmour adds. "You can't address the worry until you know what it is."

war

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTORIA HEATON/GETTY IMAGES. BELOW RIGHT: CIRCE HAMILTON FOR THE TIMES

What do you say if your teen is convinced of impending nuclear war?

What if your child is worrying about Putin putting his nuclear forces on high alert? No question, however difficult or controversial, should be off limits, Gilmour says. Your motto should be "I'm glad you told me whatever you told me", she adds. See every question as an opportunity. "Our job is to offer them a sorting space. So don't shut them down. Listening to what they're saying is not the same as agreeing with what they're saying."

So how to answer? Shahnavaz says: "You can acknowledge their worry by saying, 'I understand it's worrying.' As to the nuclear threat you could say, 'Putin has said that, but his country would be the first to be destroyed if he did, so he would never take that risk, I don't think.' You could also say, "I don't think other countries wouldn't allow him to take that risk."

It's OK not to have all the answers

It's worth bearing in mind that many children — though obviously not all — have developed resilience over the past two years. Shahnavaz says, "Children live with a lot of uncertainty in their lives in general, and we can't always reassure them about everything. We can try to give them as many answers as possible, but sometimes we don't have the answers — and that's OK." You might tell them, "It's OK to not know what's going on behind the scenes."

'Perfectionism stops kids trying new things for fear of failing'

Kathy Weeks, children's author, on how to build resilience in your child

Interview by Rachel Carlyle

Whoever said your school days were the happiest of your life clearly hadn't visited the author Kathy Weeks at her sprawling comprehensive in inner-city Derby, circa 1989.

Weeks, who went on to study maths at Oxford, was bullied for being a geek. There was constant low-level aggro: jostling in the corridors, jeering and laughing at her in lessons, books hurled at her and her belongings tossed about. "It wasn't very cool to be interested in learning at my school — you put your hand up in a lesson at your peril," she recalls. "I just didn't really fit in, although I was desperate to."

It's perhaps not surprising that for her first outing as a writer of children's fiction, Weeks, 44, has created a heroine — Harper Drew — who embodies all the character traits she wishes she'd had as an 11-year-old. "She's confident, strong, and she knows her own mind amid all the chaos around her — it's the spirit I would like to have had but didn't," she says. The book, written as an illustrated comedy-caper diary in Tom Gates/Wimpy Kid-style, has struck a chord with readers aged 9-11 since its publication last month. The second of the three-book series will be published in September.

Weeks's own experiences will no doubt resonate with other studious children who have attracted the eye of the bullies, especially in the 1980s and 90s when schools tended to have a more laissez-faire attitude to such things. A study in 2019, based on 5,000 children in the *Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children*, found intelligence was a clear risk factor for bullying — along with being overweight and having a mental health diagnosis.

"I just didn't really fit in because I wanted to learn but no one else was particularly keen on education. I remember sitting in an English lesson having put my hand up and answered a question, and this kid threw his book across the room and it hit me in the head. Everybody laughed — even the teacher.

"In maths, the kids would do these limbo dancing competitions under the table, and I was there thinking, 'I'd quite like to do the work, actually.'" Her bag — an embroidered shoulder bag from a French supermarket rather than the Adidas backpacks carried by the cool kids — was constantly being tossed about while she was mocked in schoolboy French.

She remembers one particularly grim three-night winter residential trip. "We were on a long trek in the Derbyshire countryside and for the entirety of the walk, boys threw snowballs at my head over and over again. The snowballs had stones in, it was freezing and it was relentless — my hair was plastered to my head and I was soaked. I walked, on my own, and felt totally and completely isolated. There were teachers there but nobody said anything, no one told them to stop."

Did she tell her parents about the bullying? (It probably didn't help that her father was a history teacher at the school.) "Yes, but back then there wasn't much option — that was the school I was at. I felt it was something I just had to deal with. Hopefully, today, children would feel a bit more empowered."

She never fought back, did her best to keep her head down and changed schools to a more academic one in the sixth form — where she finally did find like-minded friends. After A-levels came Oxford University (where she was constantly in awe of those with easy confidence) and a stellar career in investment banking, including at Goldman Sachs, plus a spell as a senior director at the Treasury.

But her school days never quite left her. "I think there's a lasting impact from that experience. I have an enormous sense of imposter syndrome — that constant feeling that I don't quite fit, that I'm not quite good enough. Lots of the interactions I have now are coloured by that feeling of not fitting in. I will come back after going out with friends and think, did I say the right thing? Was I funny enough? When I worked in banking I constantly thought, am I good enough?"

She admits she occasionally looks up her tormentors on social media — and some of them have even sent her friend/follow requests. "I suspect they don't remember doing it. But I really remember it and it sits very heavily still. I suspect if you talked to them now, they would be horrified by it as they probably have children of their own, who they desperately want to be happy."

Weeks now visits primary and secondary schools as part of her work with Mindset, the consultancy she set up with her husband, the *Times* columnist Matthew Syed. She hopes clever children are no longer bullied, and keeps a close eye on their two, Evie, nine, and Teddy, eight.

"There's a lot more awareness by teachers of mental health and they are looking out for kids, making sure they're doing OK. And there is much more out there for children now on how it's OK to be the person you want to be — something I never felt. But there are different challenges now. While you might not have another kid throwing his book at you or stealing your scarf, you have got bullies on social media."

> "A mistake is showing you the things you don't know and what you need to do differently

Kathy Weeks with her daughter in 2018

The 24/7 potential of today's bullying and the fragile state of many children's mental health means it's vital for parents to instil a strong sense of being comfortable with themselves and knowing who they are, she says. A study of 15,000 secondary school pupils out this week by the school mental health platform Steer Education claimed that 80 per cent of girls were hiding their distress from parents and teachers. It also found a rise in "unhealthy perfectionism" since pre-pandemic days.

Weeks believes this could be a result of society praising — and expecting — perfection in girls. "Girls tend to be praised for being perfect, and research shows they can struggle later when they are criticised if something doesn't go to plan. Perfectionism also stops children trying new things for fear of failing."

Parents can help by building up a child's inner strength and confidence so they can navigate setbacks and stand their ground when things get tough.

One key way to build resilience is to emphasise that success rarely depends on talent or looks; it's underpinned by hard work and overcoming knockbacks. "We live in a world of instant gratification and children don't see all the hard work and mistakes that go into someone's success — so it's good to discuss how hard their heroes in football or music will have worked," says Weeks. "There will always be mistakes along the way, and that doesn't mean you shouldn't give something a go. Once children know that, it helps to build resilience."

She tries to praise her children's efforts and hard work rather than success, and celebrates mistakes: "A mistake is showing you the things you don't know and what you need to do differently next time."

And she helps them to know their own mind by encouraging them to express and explore their views rather than dismissing them, tempting as that sometimes is for parents. "It helps kids find out who they are, what their values are. I try to teach them that we all think differently — it's the thing that makes you valuable in a team or group. Trying to get that across and show the benefits of having a range of different people encourages children to feel more confident to stay true to what they think and believe."

If she could take these lessons back to her 13-year-old self, would she have fared better? "If I'd had a bit more of Harper Drew's spirit I probably would. If I hadn't cared and hadn't got upset and it was evident to the bullies that it just didn't bother me in the slightest — that I was happy in my own skin and confident with who I was — I wonder whether they would have carried on. Probably not."

What's New, Harper Drew? Book 1 is published by Hodder, price £6.99