

Ask the pediatrician: How to talk with your child about the Israel-Gaza war

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The Israel-Gaza war is distressing, and children and teens may be wondering why this violence is occurring and what else will happen in

the future. Like adults, they are better able to cope with upsetting news and images when they understand more about the situation.

Here are some suggestions to help parents and caregivers support [children](#) in a constructive and helpful way.

Start by asking children what they already know. Children have likely heard about the war and its possible regional and global impact. This information may come from TV, [social media](#), school, friends or from overheard comments among adults. However, much of their information may not be accurate.

As children tell you what they know about the situation, listen for misunderstandings or frightening rumors. Acknowledge confusion. You might explain that even adults do not know all that is going on—news reports can change quickly or provide conflicting viewpoints.

Adults have many concerns about this crisis. They worry about the safety and well-being of soldiers and civilians. They fear that the violence may get worse or spread. They also have broader concerns about how the war may make other countries more unstable, and the impact it may have in our own country.

Children may have some of these same concerns, but they can have very different ones as well. This is why it is so important that we ask children directly about their worries. We can't provide effective reassurance until we know their specific fears.

Once children share their concerns with you, provide honest explanations. Correct misunderstandings or misinformation, but don't ignore or minimize their fears. Help children identify ways to cope with anxiety, sadness and fears rather than pretend that they don't or shouldn't exist.

Keep in mind that kids will understand and react differently according to their developmental age and [personal experiences](#). The [older children](#) are, the more discussion they will likely need to answer questions and address concerns. Begin by providing the basic information in simple and direct terms. Then ask if they have any questions. Take cues from your child to decide how much information to share.

Point out that people in the United States and elsewhere are working to help families directly impacted by the war and to keep all of us safe. Children often look for reassurance that they're safe after such graphic reminders of violence and conflict.

Avoid exposure to graphic images and limit the amount of exposure to [media coverage](#) and discussion in social media. Too much exposure can be overwhelming for anyone and make it difficult to understand what is happening and process related feelings.

Graphic media coverage can trigger feelings of grief for children who have experienced the death of a friend or family member, even if unrelated to violence. Consider this an opportunity to take some time away from media. Turn off the television, computers and phones and come together as a family and community for support.

For children with family or friends directly affected, of course, this war will feel very personal. They will identify more closely with the stress and losses experienced. Children in families who feel strong ties due to shared religious affiliations may also feel connected.

Those children without direct connections may also be at increased risk of troubling reactions. For example, children who live in communities with high rates of violence may become more concerned about their own physical safety. Those who are part of communities in the United States that have experienced racial or [ethnic discrimination](#) may feel more

distress and anger when hearing about acts of aggression and bias.

Children who have experienced poverty or [food insecurity](#) may feel anxious hearing stories of families with limited food or money for basic necessities. Stories from the war may be triggering for children who have themselves survived wars or other trauma, or whose families have experienced refugee status. Children who have had challenges with anxiety or depression before the war are also likely to benefit from additional support at this time.

Children and teens are likely to ask a number of common questions in times of crisis and upheaval. Choose answers that provide honest information and helpful reassurance. Some examples:

Could I have done anything to prevent this?

Adults may be wondering if our country could have done more to prevent this war from happening. While it seems obvious to us that there is nothing children could have done to prevent the war, kids may feel helpless and wish they could have changed what has happened. Let children know that this is a common reaction—we all wish that there is something we could have done.

Reassure children that our country is doing all it can to respond effectively and keep us safe. Suggest steps that can help those affected (write letters, say prayers, raise funds, for example). Encourage children to work to promote safety, tolerance and acceptance in our own communities.

Is this going to change my life?

Children and teens are often very concerned about themselves. When

there is a crisis, they may become even more concerned about what affects them personally. They may act immaturely. Sometimes adults see this as being selfish or uncaring.

Expect children to think more about themselves for the time being. Once they feel reassured that they are being listened to and their needs will be met, they are more likely to be able to start to think about the needs of others.

Can I help?

Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to help. Though there may be little that they can do to help the immediate victims of violence in the Middle East or elsewhere, there are positive things they can do.

They can start by taking care of themselves—telling you when they are upset or worried, being honest and open. They can also offer help to other members of their community—their friends and classmates, their teacher and other adults. They can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for the victims and survivors of the war. Examples could include working with charitable organizations as a family or school project.

Often what children and teens need most is to have someone they trust listen to their questions, accept their feelings and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing the perfect thing to say—there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their thoughts and concerns. Answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses. Provide appropriate reassurance and support.

It helps children to realize that it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings. They will then be

left to deal with them alone. Share your own feelings and try to model positive ways you cope with them.

When a major world crisis like this occurs, it helps to bring the topic up with children even if they are quite young. At first, they may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is generally not a good idea to force them to talk with you; keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Let them know you are available when they are ready to talk and let them choose the time.

When a war results in this much death, destruction and disruption, it is natural to be upset. However, if children continue to be very upset for several days or have persistent nightmares, seem unable to cope with their fears, or are having trouble in school, at home or with their friends, it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. The war may have triggered other distressing experiences, worries or concerns.

You may want to speak with your pediatrician, a teacher or school counselor, mental health professional or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you don't need to wait until you think they need counseling. Take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

More information: For more information, go to [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.HealthyChildren.org).

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