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## **Talking about the war. How to prevent stress reactions in children and adolescents following the dramatic war in Ukraine**

The tough historical period we are witnessing – life during a pandemic and now the war – forces us adults, educators and psychologists to consider that the continuous exposure of children and adolescents to a collective emergency can cause a great sense of uncertainty, feelings of powerlessness in the face of threatening and unexpected events and the loss of hope for the future. Such extreme stressors require responses that can minimize traumatic responses and foster the children's emotional health.

It is always paramount to allow the integration between affective and cognitive states, helping them feel free to ask questions, to guarantee that they can get consistent answers without neither minimizing nor emphasizing facts. The news on TV can be difficult to understand, especially the visual content that cause the younger ones particularly to develop emotions of fear and anguish. We know the effects of vicarious traumatization and for children what happens "elsewhere" is as dangerous as if it were happening to themselves. As therapists who know the effects of traumatic experiences, we believe it is useful to communicate with children about such a difficult topic and help them with their needs for predictability and safety. EMDR Europe has always paid attention to the needs of the victims of disasters and we are thus trying to provide some simple guidelines to help adults support children and adolescents in these very traumatic times.

### **INDICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS**

The war has activated trauma memories for previous wars. We know how injuries following these dramatic events can remain stored in the memory and the narratives are passed through generations. Currently we are all experiencing the fear of another war. The press often talks about the Third World War and, of course, this leads us to wonder about the objective and subjective meaning of these words. The whole world is feeling intense emotions following what is happening in Ukraine. Inevitably as adults, we are worried about the future of our children and this impacts out children

. We know that the children observe the adults' behaviors when they are uncertain, thus trying to understand how the world works. Sometimes, they do not ask questions, particularly when they feel it is not welcome or would activate further worry . For children to feel safe, we try to ensure they can trust the important adults around them. These are the world and the family for the younger ones; while growing older, they also need to feel the environment as a safe, predictable place. However, how can we provide safety to children if fear and hopelessness also overwhelm us? We cannot deny the emotions we feel; actually, we have to find a consistent way to share them in a way that is managable for children to comprehend. It is impossible to hide our feelings from our

children's attentive eyes: they observe us to understand what we feel, what we sense, and what is happening.

## **USEFUL INDICATIONS FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS**

### **Let's observe their behaviors**

Children show whatever they do not say: with their behavior, play and small somatic symptoms, like tummy ache, head ache and excessive fatigue. They may have more difficulties to separate from their reference adults, and they can have difficulties in concentrating at school and thus suffer a temporary drop in their school performance. Pre-school children could play the war or refer to the facts that have happened during the day and unexpectedly ask questions that appear to be out of context. Children might even play violent games and play the "villain": at evolutionary level, winning over the weakest provides higher guarantees for survival and the little ones activate more archaic defense systems: as a sign of their fear to be vulnerable and exposed, they might express more anger than fear. Do not judge them but tell them that maybe they are behaving like that only because of fear and worry.

### **Allow children to ask questions**

Adults are often worried when children start asking questions. They do not always have all the answers; hence, they try to avoid all the topics related to critical events in the hope that the child does not suffer. Often the little ones are kept away from traumatic events, without considering that they may be absorbing details even when they are apparently distracted. The news from the media, quiet conversations at home, their parents' worried faces are already a form of communication. We can help children ask what they want to know and be aware that we can tell them we do not have all the answers. Minimizing, telling them that the war is far away and that we are safe may be half-true. When a child asks, let's try to provide understandable age-related answers. Give them words to organize the events and help them express their emotions and anxieties, their fears and their concerns. The children's ability to feel sad for their peers is however one of the first forms of empathy. However, it would be appropriate to decide what to show them, and what is better to avoid at their age. We can watch the TV news together and comment what is happening, thus giving them the possibility to ask questions and to get answers. It is not required to expose children to all the news and images; however, if you are used to watching the news together you should continue in the same way because changing your habits would make them feel even more scared. Children should not be exposed to such images when they are alone as this could be damaging for their age.

If the child does not ask any questions, let's ask a few ourselves. Saying, "*What do you think/feel? What would you like to know? How are you feeling? What do you know? Have you talked about this at school?*" This is an excellent way to show that the child can ask us about what is happening and find a safe, attentive listener. .

### **Provide possible answers**

You might not be able to answer the children's questions; thus, it could be positive to look for news together, to discuss age appropriate facts, to ask them what they know and think about what is happening. Children have their own ideas and sometimes they are right; hence, let's not waste the opportunity to learn from them too. When providing answers, you must be honest. You should not give your personal opinions on what is happening; instead, it is useful for them to know facts as they are or as we assume they are.

Your answers must not aim at trying to make them stop thinking about the events. *"Play and do not think about it; nothing bad is going to happen here. We are safe. These things always happen far away. You are a child and you should not think about these things. Children should only play and be happy."* These are just mild attempts at denying their fear and will result in making them feel more insecure. Children must be allowed to feel concern and to resort to an adult for a hug. Parents and teachers might only answer, *"You are right to be worried. I am worried about what is happening too. I am so sorry for those children who are experiencing the war and I am sorry for you because you are so little and you still have to know these terrible things"*.

When providing answers, we must try to comprehend what they have already heard, the understanding they have of what they have heard and actual reality. When children are not informed correctly, they make up their own idea of things, which is often times even more dramatic and it does not correspond to reality; instead, it represents an attempt to understand the world. . Of course, trying to protect the children from information is a risk since they search for their own answers by themselves. Children, particularly in school age, can easily access the news on the internet and by talking to their peers; hence, the risk is that they lose trust in us as their reference adults, as people capable of being their safe haven where they can go and find information, reassurance or, simply, a comfortable hug. Therefore, it is paramount to tell the truth proportionally to the age and understanding of the child. Let's not trivialize what is happening. The historical moment we are experiencing is complex and children understand that. Depriving it of its due value would expose them to feeling that they do not deserve to be informed on what is happening. Even though we provide answers, they ask the same question several times, because it is hard for them to integrate details that can be very painful for them or that can trigger fear. We can repeat the answers already given to them and possibly check that they have understood. If there is something they do not understand, we shall try to find a simpler way to present the information.

### **Find a way to soothe them**

When talking to children about the events we are currently experiencing, physical proximity is paramount: keep the child close or, if he/she is very little, hold him/her in your arms, sit at their height to facilitate eye contact, speak openly about what is happening and convey a message of hope at the same time. *"Something bad is occurring, which should not happen. However, we are all trying to stop this terrible war. The Heads of States are talking to understand how to stop this all". "It is normal for you to be worried about the war."* *"When you feel strange, scared, sad, or you want to say something, you can reach for help or say how you are feeling to a person you trust: mum, dad or your teachers"*.

Sometimes there are no solutions to the things related to these big events; however, something always works: a hug, a caress, physical proximity and the possibility to speak out what you are feeling. The words *"I understand it, I feel it, I am sorry, I feel that way too, I am sorry too, I am also worried and sad about what is happening. But I feel hopeful because most people want peace and many people have fought for this fundamental right, which cannot and must not get lost"*. *"Yet, it can*

*happen – just like now – that some states do not respect this fundamental human right to live safely and in peace, to be entitled to be free to express their opinions. You know, unfortunately these rights are not always respected. However, I can guarantee that the world is aware of what is happening and everyone is doing his/her best for the world to be a safe place again”.*

## TALKING TO CHILDREN

### At the nursery school

If children show an interest in talking about the subject or if you notice any changes in their way to be at school, in their relationship to others or in their way of playing (they play the war, they call each other the names of the protagonists of this war, or refer to Russia or Ukraine in their games), you should talk about it. Provide information, possibly without any interpretations but giving facts. Direct the conversation by asking them questions to foster dialogue and facilitate learning too: *“Do you know what the word war means? Do you know where Russia and Ukraine are located?” “In your opinion, why do men make war? What would you tell a child who lives in those areas? What can we do to live in peace?”*

These questions aim at fostering the expression of their emotions and at organizing their interpretation of facts in a better way, too.

### At the elementary school

Between age 9 and 12, children are more actively interested in the news and they may have quite clear concepts of what a nation is and where Russia and Ukraine are located. However, it is also important with this age range to foster a discussion free from any subjective contents and factual interpretations. Research can be conducted about geographical information, to help them know the populations of the states at war, learn the history of previous wars, and consider – depending on their age – what facts their parents or grandparents have narrated to them about previous wars and what behaviors we could enact to foster the dialogue between different cultures and geographical origins. Help them understand the concept of peace, armistice and conflict management using examples from their own life.

*Since the evening of February 22 and for many days thereafter, TV, radio and the internet have been talking about the terrible violence in Ukraine and disseminating constant news about how the situation is evolving in these countries. All heads of states are trying to find an agreement and to stop the war. They are doing their best to protect the population and implement safety measures. However, notwithstanding their commitment, a long time will be required before this ends and peace can be reinstated. We cannot always do a lot as people. We can talk about it, trying to understand how we feel, what we feel for the people who are experiencing this dramatic event. Talking is very important. It allows us to feel lighter afterwards. You may have seen images on television, which have upset you and maybe you can stop thinking about them. In this case, telling the way you feel when you think about what has happened is a good way to feel less alone. When we talk with other people about the things that worry or upset us, often times we feel better then. Hence, the worrying thoughts go away or become less worrying at least.”*

## **At the middle school**

Children in this age range already have information and a good understanding of facts. Hence, they can propose to organize discussion groups in class themselves.

Again, facilitate dialogue here, without judging but committing to providing a subjective version of the facts. Help them tell what they know and what they feel. Listen respectfully to their opinions and try to understand the lingering fantasies and fears that they hardly express at this age. The adult's function is to facilitate the free expression and the creation of meanings by integrating prevalently cognitive information with emotions.

At this age, children may minimize by making ironic comments on the events. This may be their way to keep excessively upsetting emotions at bay. Again, it is paramount not to judge their normal reactions with severity. It is difficult to access vulnerability at this age. Normalize their "emotional protection" reactions by trying to give meaning to them: *"Sometimes, joking protects us from emotions that are more difficult to access and this is normal. It is a common defense attitude. Maybe we can understand together why being scared or feeling fragile is so scary"*.

## **COMMON REACTIONS AFTER A STRESSFUL EVENT**

Both children and adults can have symptoms after a stressful event. The most common during the developmental age are:

- Distress triggered by event-related stimuli.
- Repetitive games with war-related contents
- Aggressive behaviors.
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares, sleep disorders, nocturnal awakening.
- Somatic symptoms (tummy ache, headache, excessive fatigue).
- Crying for trivial reasons.
- Intrusive event-related thoughts or images.
- Separation anxiety.
- Sleep disorders, nightmares, fear of the dark.
- Irritation and anger.
- Difficulty to talk about what is happening.
- Hopelessness about the future.

**"Peace begins with a smile."**

*(Mother Teresa of Calcutta)*