

CORNERSTONE  
DAY SCHOOL

# Parents Matter

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## Talking to children about war: considerations and guidance

The unprecedented shocking and graphic images and descriptions that have been shared on social media related to the Israel-Hamas war have been disturbing and overwhelming to many adults. Naturally, parents may want to protect their children from seeing or hearing frightening details of war. Often, whether we discuss war with children or not, they may hear information (whether reliable or not) from other sources. This possibility is even more likely with the advent of social media. Some choose instead to create an open environment where children feel free to ask questions, which can mitigate negative effects of exposure and foster resilience.

### Limiting exposure

Do not allow children to be exposed to violent or upsetting coverage of the war, particularly for younger children. As a rule, the younger the child, the less the exposure to information about the war they should have. Where possible, preschool children should not be exposed to any coverage at all. Parents can support older children by viewing media together to provide support and information and allow ongoing conversations. Also note that kids frequently absorb information from adult discussions even when adults are unaware and may misinterpret things and incorrectly fill in the blanks, with inaccuracies providing greater distress. Thus, it is important to monitor adult conversations.

### Behaviors to pay attention to

Pay attention to any behavior changes and new regressive behaviors, such as thumb-sucking, increased tearfulness, clinginess, increased

acting out, and disruptions to sleep, appetite, and concentration. Children may also show distress through physical complaints, aches, or pains. Children with prior exposure to trauma and loss may have even more intense reactions and may require extra attention. Seek additional help where needed and communicate with your child's school and counselors.

### To discuss or not to discuss?

Make a decision guided by knowledge of a developmental stage and your child's current level of awareness of the events. At age 4, children start understanding or becoming preoccupied with fears about death, particularly fearing their parents' death. At age 5-6, kids begin understanding concepts like nations and war. 6-to-7-year-olds in school are typically able to understand at least some of what is going on. At age 9-10, children begin worrying about different possibilities related to war. However, even within the same age group, children (as with adults) have differential levels of vulnerability. Parents who are aware of these differences should adopt flexible behavior in response to differing child needs.

### Having the conversation(s)

1. Do your best to stay calm and monitor the tone of your discussions. Expressing views in an angry or aggressive way may be scary for kids. Remember that you are the model for your child's emotional regulation.
2. Find a good time and a place to discuss what's happening. Don't force kids to discuss until they are ready. If they don't want to talk about it at all, that's OK.

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# Talking to children about war: cont.

3. Ask what kids know already.
4. Use truthful, simple language and concepts that kids can understand. Don't overwhelm them with excessive information.
5. Clear up any misunderstandings and correct any negative generalizations or biases. Avoid stereotyping people by race, nationality, or religion. You may use the opportunity to explain prejudice and encourage tolerance.
6. Ask (don't assume) how your kids are thinking and feeling.
7. Validate these thoughts and feelings rather than dismissing or negating them— e.g. say things like “I understand it's scary to think about,” “I hear that you are feeling worried about whether our family will be affected” INSTEAD OF: “it's silly to be concerned about that,” “don't worry about it”
8. Note that concerns may vary as a function of age:
  - a. Younger children hearing about war may worry about their own safety. Discuss where the war is and reassure them that their own community is safe, without making unrealistic promises.
  - b. Middle schoolers may be more focused on facts. You can provide them with accurate information and engage in further research together.
  - c. High schoolers are starting to figure out their own beliefs and values, assimilating and/ or rejecting those of peers, social media, parents, and role models. Encourage critical thinking about their information sources, facilitate consideration of the broader context, and discuss how they may have a potential impact now and in the future.
9. Answer questions truthfully. If you are not sure how to answer, that's alright: you can say that you're not sure can work together to find the answer.
10. Families with loved ones in affected regions should discuss children's concerns related to the safety of their relatives and friends and validate how challenging uncertainty and worry can be. While staying updated is essential when loved ones are involved, breaks and alternative activities are essential for the entire family.
11. Sharing with kids that you are upset by these events too is OK. However, do not burden them with your concerns.

### Foster resilience:

- Increase family/community/social connection and provide extra reassurance and hugs.
- Emphasize those helping to support those affected and end the conflict.
- Stick to routines, which are comforting and enhance feelings of safety and stability in context of unpredictable/uncontrollable external events.
- As a family, you may wish to discuss if there are things you would like to research or ways you would like to help. This may include researching the history of the region, sending letters to those affected by the conflict, writing to your local representatives, sending donations to charitable organizations, or participating in activities offered by your community (e.g., prayer).
- Be patient with yourself and with your kids: recognize that we may all experience increased stress at this time and that we are all doing our best.



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