**Talking to children about the war**

A key part of a child’s growth is the development of a curious mind about the world around them. At this point, it can feel like they are asking a million questions which can sometimes leave one feeling overwhelmed. This stage of a child's development is also useful from an evolutionary perspective as it helps with an understanding of the world around them (what is dangerous and what isn’t) and subsequently helps with facilitating their survival.

Bearing this in mind, we can imagine what it must have felt like for children over the past few weeks as they have had to contend with rumours of imminent war and may now have heard the news that a war has started. In this day and age where information is unlimited, it’s perhaps not surprising that many are feeling overwhelmed.

It is also important to note as parents and caregivers that our own reaction to the news of the war is important because another way that children learn and develop is through observation and modelling. Therefore, if the topic of conversation is centred around the fears and the consequences of war (which is sometimes inevitable as we are human) you can imagine how this would leave the children feeling.

Additionally, it can be helpful to remember that over the last couple of years we have been facing challenging and unprecedented times concerning the coronavirus (COVID -19) outbreak which has left a lot of people, including children, feeling scared and experiencing increased levels of stress, anxiety, and difficulties with sleep.

Therefore, as human beings geared up for survival it makes sense that our normal response to a threat might be a range of emotions, one of which is anxiety.

For some children, they do not have a clear understanding of what is going on hence they might ask questions to make sense of things going on around them regarding the news centred on the wars. Generally, this appears to be a tricky conversation to have. So, why and how do we go about this?

To understand the why, it might be useful to think of the alternatives to *not* talking to children about it. As previously noted, children’s minds are curious and are looking for answers to the many questions they have therefore, it can be helpful for them to hear about the news of war from people they trust and have a sense of safeness with as opposed to hearing it on their own on the news or from the playground.

For older children, explaining how war has historically aided the fight against injustice and helped to prevent worse things from happening and keep others safe might be useful…..stressing of course that violence is not always the answer. As a general rule, the amount shared should be dependent on the age, level of development of the child - enough to help them feel contained and informed and not too much to leave them feeling overwhelmed. Allowing them to explore the range of emotions that they could be experiencing (or might in the future) is usually reassuring and normalising…and do remind then them they are absolutely not alone in experiencing these feelings.

Top 10 tips.

1. It is important to be as truthful as you can in a way that feels safe enough for the children, a way that does not feel complicated and is easy enough to understand (this can be tricky, but it can be an opportunity to be creative – for younger children use of fairy tales and stories and other methods to shape their understanding etc). This means that it is important for us not to hide things away from them because it is better for them to hear it from us (their people of safeness) as opposed to reading it or hearing it from others. Also bearing in mind the curious nature of the mind, it is inevitable that for things that they do not understand they might go ahead to research and look for answers. It can be helpful if they get their information from a reliable source which can feel containing and reassuring. However, it is important to share information at a level that is developmentally right for the child and just enough to help the child feel contained and safe.
2. After educating them about wars, validating and normalising the anxiety or feelings they might be experiencing, try not to overexpose them to information. As we know, this is very common in times like these, via the television, social media, and other platforms, and this can be very distressing and exacerbate their worry.
3. Encourage your children to talk about their fears or concerns in general. We know that life can be hard and busy and sometimes children are aware of this and might not want to disturb you. Therefore, it might be helpful to make a conscious effort to let them know that you are mindful of how difficult it can be and reassure them that you are available to talk about things. Giving them extra love and attention at this time can be helpful, especially at difficult times like this.
4. Give them opportunities to express their emotions in different ways such as writing, drawing, stories, songs, and things that feel helpful for the child. Some children find a feelings box helpful. It might also be helpful to introduce them to some simple relaxation techniques such as taking 3 deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of 3 and out for 3.
5. It can also be useful to be aware of our own reactions as parents or primary caregivers. This is because as noted earlier, one of the ways children learn and develop is via observing and then modelling adult behaviour. Hence, children can pick up anxieties or worries displayed by parents. A balanced reaction to the news can be helpful for children, as despite the nature of the news, they can learn to feel contained because of your reaction and vice versa.
6. Playing and having fun with your children more at this time can be helpful as it can provide a sense of distraction and hence help them feel more relaxed.
7. Try to be mindful of symptoms of stress that could present as physical health symptoms such as headaches, stomach-ache, changes to appetite, eating and weight, nausea, difficulties with sleep and explore these difficulties a bit more with the child.
8. For some children, hearing about the war might mean they want to avoid going to school or going out in general, therefore it can be helpful to ensure that we encourage and support them to keep going out and stay active. Avoidance of places reinforces the idea that there is something to fear and also reduces the chances of getting opportunities to challenge the notion that being outside is unsafe.
9. Encourage them to access services like Kooth to talk about their difficulties.
10. If things get worse, do not hesitate to speak to your GP.