

# How to talk to preschoolers about war -- and help them feel safe

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## What to expect at this age

When countries wage war, it can affect children profoundly. Even if the conflict is thousands of miles away, it still undermines a preschooler's deep need to see the world as a safe and predictable place. What's more, if a relative or other loved one – or any person she personally knows – is called to duty, she may harbor deep anxiety about his or her safety.

Kids this age have a range of reactions to armed conflict. If your toddler or preschooler isn't directly affected by it and hasn't been exposed to repeated television images of battle or bomb-ravaged cities, she may have little or no reaction. In fact, a child this age is likely to react more to her *parents'* distress than to anything else. It's important for you to try to monitor your own emotions when your child is with you, and to help reassure her that she's safe. One of the best things you can do is limit your child's exposure to television news. Repetitive newscasts increase a child's stress and may confuse her into thinking that a single wartime event happened over and over again.

Children dealing with other traumas at the same time – such as a divorce or a death in the family – are more at risk for anxiety. But even if everything else in her life is fine, if your child has picked up anxious vibes from you or other important people in her life, she's likely to show signs of regression. She may act younger than usual, whine or cling more, regress in potty training, or wake up more frequently in the middle of the night. It's hard on you, but it's a normal childhood reaction to anxiety – she's trying to revert to a time when she was younger and felt safer.

Give her lots of hugs and cuddling. Encourage her to sleep with her favorite doll or her night-light on if she wants to, or even to hop in your bed if she feels

the need (and you're open to having her there) – even if six months ago she decided she was too grown up for such things. And if you suspect that she's not voicing what she really feels – or can't, because she doesn't yet have the vocabulary – watch for nonverbal signs of anxiety, such as disrupted sleep patterns, angry or sad scribbles and drawings, or unusually withdrawn or aggressive play with other children.

In times like these, one of the greatest losses – other than loss of life – is loss of control, says Bev Clayton, a social worker with the American Red Cross.

"Children have almost no control over their lives, and when they see that their parents don't have control, either, it's frightening to them. So parents, even if they're upset, need to show control." The most important place to exert control is over your daily household routines. Don't skip meals or naps. Go to the park to play as usual, put her to bed on time, and make sure her caregivers are also following the normal order of the day. "You want to make sure your child feels secure, and routines do that," says Clayton.

## How to talk about war with your preschooler

**Be brief and reassuring.** A preschooler may ask a question that seems only tangentially related to the current situation, such as "What happens when people die?" You can use her question as a springboard to talk about death, but in this case her underlying concern is most likely, "Am I safe?" Reassure her that she's secure, and that you and the rest of the family are, too. "We're all okay, and we're going to be okay" are important words for her to hear.

**Validate her feelings.** Resist the urge to say, "Don't worry." (Do you feel any better when someone says this to *you*?) Her feelings are real and she needs to be able to express them. Instead, you can say, "I know you feel worried because you've heard that our soldiers are fighting, but that's happening very, very far away from here – on the other side of the world."

**Tell her adults are working to keep her and everyone safe.** It's common for preschoolers to assume that conflict elsewhere in the world could move closer to home. As adults, it's sometimes hard to be reassuring in the face of our own anxieties about an ongoing war and possible counter-attacks on our soil. But you can tell your child (and remind yourself) that lots of people are working to keep us safe. Talk about the ways that everyone from the President to our military troops to the local police is working to protect us and to bring the conflict to a speedy end.

**Be ready to revisit the topic again and again.** Don't be surprised if your preschooler asks the same questions repeatedly. She doesn't understand permanence yet, so even though she's heard about deaths or bombs dropping, she expects things to magically return to normal soon and may be confused when they don't. She may keep asking about the situation, especially if she sees that it's ongoing.

**Be ready *not* to talk about it.** If you're sure that your child hasn't heard much about the war, don't press the issue with her. At her age it's fine – indeed, it's advisable – to be oblivious to frightening international events.

**Use plenty of nonverbal reassurance.** Some of your best clues about your preschooler's anxiety level will come out nonverbally – through play, sleeping and eating patterns, and whether or not she becomes whiny or clingy or regresses in other ways. It's important to respond to her nonverbally as well. If she seems worried, give her extra hugs and

kisses. Above all, try to stick to normal routines to bolster her sense of security in her familiar daily life.

**Have confidence in your ability to help.** As a parent, you have the challenge of helping your child feel secure when you may be feeling insecure yourself. Remember that limiting access to scary news reports, sticking to comforting routines, and finding concrete ways to help those directly affected (such as packing up extra clothes and household items to send abroad, contributing to collection drives for medical or humanitarian relief, and making dinner for the neighboring family whose father is stationed halfway across the world) will reassure you as well as your child. And when you help yourself cope, you're helping your child as well. "Kids are wonderfully resilient," says Flemming Graae, director of child and adolescent psychiatry services at New York Presbyterian Hospital in White Plains, New York. "With good support, most children will do fine" – even in unsettling times like these.

## What kids ask about war ... what parents answer

**"Why are you crying?"** You can tell your child, "I'm sad because some soldiers (or some people near the fighting) were hurt badly." If she has further questions, answer them as simply as possible. But remember that a preschooler will be upset if she sees that you're shocked or horrified by some mysterious event that she doesn't understand. Try to save your strongest reactions for times when she's not around.

**"Why did people die?"** Much of a preschooler's response to news she's heard may consist simply of trying to figure out what actually

happened. Once she has a grasp on the "whats," expect a lot of "why" questions, such as, "Why did the soldiers die? Why were they fighting a war? Why are we mad at the other country?" Keep your answers as brief and straightforward as possible: "The soldiers died because their plane was so damaged that it couldn't stay in the sky." As for how to answer more complicated – and fraught – questions about the current political situation, let your own convictions be your guide. Just remember to keep your answers as simple as you can.

**"Will Uncle Joe die, too?"** It's hard to pooh-pooh this question when a family member or other military or medical personnel in your child's life truly are in harm's way. Rather than brush off her concerns with bland – and perhaps dishonest – reassurances (after all, can you really say with certainty that "he'll be fine"?), acknowledge your child's very real fears. "You're worried that Joe might get hurt while he's helping our troops, aren't you?" You might say. "We all are, but Joe's with a lot of men and women whose job is to protect each other. We're praying that he comes home safe as soon as his own job is done."

**"Are Grandma and Grandpa okay?"** Children of all ages commonly imagine immediate risk to themselves and their loved ones during times like these. Your preschooler doesn't understand that Grandma and Grandpa live on the other side of the world from the war zone. Reassure her: "Yes, they're fine. They are far, far away from where the fighting is happening. Would you like to call them on the phone right now and talk to them?" Related questions can include, "Am I going to be okay? Are they going to drop a bomb on our house, too?"

**"Are there monsters under my bed?"** Children may become fearful of strangers, monsters, darkness, or other unknowns. After all, these phantoms are easier to contemplate than the concept of war. Reassure your child about her stated fear: "No, there are no monsters under your bed or anywhere else. Let's go look together so you can see that monsters aren't real." You don't need to explain anything about real-world "monsters." Your child just wants you to reassure her that she'll be safe in her own bed tonight.