



How to support children during crisis

A sense of control, a sense of predictability and social support protects children against severe distress. Hopefully you will find some of the advice below useful.

Normal reactions to stress can be to:

- Become nervous if their parents are struggling to cope
- Become anxious and afraid of things
- Loose interest
- Behave younger than their age, experience behavioural difficulties, and experience problems with friends
- Suffer from concentration and sleep difficulties, such as nightmares

These reactions may have a high intensity and be experienced as overwhelming. It's important to remember that the same principles that recreate safety and calmness in everyday life, will help to regulate your child's reactions, also in times when their reactions are much stronger than you have experienced them before.

Age-specific crisis reactions may be:

- 1–4 years: Fear of the dark, clinginess, disruptions to routines (relating to sleep, eating and toilet visits)
- 5–10 years: Anger, attention seeking, playing truant, concentration issues, magical thinking, fear of being alone
- 11–13 years: Problems with behaviour and school, feelings of guilt, loss of appetite, feigned indifference
- 14–18 years: Lack of interest and energy, behavioural and concentration issues, feelings of shame or guilt

Children need:

- to be comforted
- to feel safe
- to be accepted, understood, and supported for whatever they feel and think
- to know they have someone they can rely on
- to have someone to talk to, someone who explains what is happening
- to have small breaks and time-out from worries and fear

Try to establish some familiar daily routines, even the small things – this provides stability and a sense of security.

Advice for parents:

- Try not to overreact; take control if you must.
- Calm yourself before talking to the child about the incident.
- Explain in simple terms and sufficiently for the child to understand; avoid violent details.
- Children need repetition – be patient.
- Let the child express emotions by playing, drawing, writing, or telling stories.
- Set aside time to do something else together.
- Children need to believe that things will get better, tell them that we are doing all we can to make peace and stop the war.
- Comfort and encourage them, without giving them false hope.
- Children learn coping techniques by how **you** handle the situation – model learning.

*Explain that you don't expect the child to look after **you** or to make **you** feel better.*

Advice for parents – for themselves:

- Recognise your emotions.
- Do not have overly high expectations.
- Focus on what you can influence – this helps reduce stress.
- Be aware that the family members will handle the crisis differently.
- Ask for help from your family and friends or people around you – when you need it.
- Even if you are in despair, the child needs to know that you are the bigger person.

Look after yourself.

What helpers can do to support parents and children:

- Support and relieve parents so they can help the child become calm through being calm themselves (co-regulation).
- Give parents guidance and the confidence to support and encourage the child's natural need to explore his/her surroundings.

How to talk to a child about what is happening:

- Open and direct communication
 - Tell your children what you know, but do it with compassion and care, and accept that the news might be hard for children to accept.
 - Making children sad by communicating honestly and directly with them is not a dangerous thing, because the parents are the only ones who can truly comfort the child.
 - Remember that children also need to understand the adults' reactions and thoughts.
 - Children's fantasies can be worse than what they will hear from you.
 - But: Be careful with details on violence and suffering, but explain what is happening.

Spend time playing with your children

- If possible, do something with your children or let them play with someone else.
- Can adults take shifts on playing with a group of children?
- Be with the child and talk to them about normal things, sing a song, read a book, if possible, tell a story.
- If possible, use familiar objects, blankets, etc. to make the surroundings feel safer for the kids.

Do not let your children listen to or watch the news for hours

- If possible, keep children out of reach of news videos.
- Control what they watch.
- But remember, they may need digital devices to keep in touch with friends.

Regular routines and clear rules

- If possible, keep up routines, it makes children feel safe.
- Bedtime routines, if possible, wash hands and face, brush teeth etc.

Sleep – some practical advice

- As a rule, anything that keeps the thoughts away from what makes them anxious will help the child sleep.
- A good distraction method is to ask children to try counting backwards from one thousand in steps of (say) 7, 5 or 1, depending on how good they are at counting (1000 – 993 – 986 – 979, and so on).
- Older children (over 10 years) can try the following breathing exercise: First, breathe normally three times. After the third exhalation, tell them to hold their breath for as long as they can. Then breathe out and in again three times normally, and once again, after the third exhalation, tell them to hold their breath for as long as they can. If they continue with this exercise, they will soon become drowsy and start falling asleep. At the same time, focusing like this on their breathing will divert their attention away from their worries or the thoughts that create anxiety.
- Maybe you or some of the other parents know of other effective methods for inducing sleep that you can teach your children?

Further reading and advice: <https://www.childrenandwar.org/>