

## Talking to Children about what is happening in Ukraine

This is a brief guide to support you to talk to children, no matter what their age. The vast majority of children will be being exposed to the Ukraine situation in the media and seeing/hearing that innocent people are being hurt, (including children), is frightening and upsetting.

Many young people will experience a range of emotions including sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety. Families and educators can support children by establishing a sense of safety and security, helping children to process their thoughts and feelings, and placing the events in the proper context.

Additional tips include the following:

- Talk about the importance of monitoring access to the news and social media use. Help children understand that constant use of social media can be anxiety provoking and may expose them to traumatizing images.
- Be attuned to children's knowledge of the events and their potential reactions. Be available to talk and listen. Let their questions be your guide on if and how much to focus on the tragedy.
- Maintain normalcy and routine while being flexible to children's needs. This creates a sense of safety. Give reassurance that their normal daily routines and lives will not change.
- Let children know it's okay to have many different feelings and there is no one right way to respond.
- Provide ways for children to express emotion, such as journaling, writing letters, talking, art, or music.
- Identify the various ways in which people are helping; emphasize the ability to do good.
- Keeping in mind that children's questions should be your guide, the following offers guidance on having developmentally appropriate conversations with children and young people.
  - Infant children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Provide concrete examples of safety measures that are being implemented each day at home, at school, and in the community to help keep them safe.
  - Junior aged children are more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy or false reports. For many, their perceptions of safety will be strongly influenced by social media. It is important to help them become educated consumers of the news, provide limits around the amount of time they are exposing themselves to graphic images, and encourage them to reach out to a trusted adult if they are unsure or anxious about what they are hearing.
  - High school students have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. Some may express anger, judge others by the actions of those they perceive as similar to the perpetrator(s), or want to retaliate. It is important for adults to help these students have space and time to process their emotions and provide healthy coping strategies. Students may also share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community.

As always, it is extremely important to reinforce for children that the acts and beliefs of some people do not reflect the actions and beliefs of others. We need to be alert to the possibility of linked

harassment, bullying, hurtful/insensitive comments and even hate crimes, and there is a risk of unfairly stigmatizing people who are perceived to resemble a perpetrator because of their race, language, religion, or the way they dress.

Bullying and harassment are never acceptable, but they can be particularly damaging when certain students or segments of society feel especially vulnerable. Families and school staff need to identify students who may be at risk of being targeted and prevent and intervene quickly and effectively in the presence of abusive behaviours toward any students.

Adults can help children understand the importance of treating all people with dignity and not judging entire groups of people for the actions of a few. In addition to modelling compassion and acceptance of differences in their own words and behaviour, adults can highlight examples of musicians, artists, athletes, and other public personalities who are reinforcing messages of compassion and hope.

If your child is old enough and you feel it is appropriate, you could talk through with them what steps they could take to help. Taking action and feeling a sense of hope helps people feel reassured and in more control of what is happening around them.