



How to talk to kids about the war and maintain their emotional well-being

The fear, pain, and enduring loss are shadows we carry, bound to us for the foreseeable future. We yearn to escape the cruel reality and the distressing news, gripped by fear, worry, hurt, and anger. If we find it challenging to bear, how can we lighten this burden for our children? How do we articulate this emotional complexity when words falter? These recent days have thrust us into a heartbreaking reality: war cannot be concealed. Our children are exposed; they feel, see, and hear us. They discern our anxiety and react to it. Should we shield them from the truth in the hope of protecting them from pain, we inadvertently heighten their anxiety. Hence, it is paramount to engage them, explaining what's happening in simple, clear, and age-appropriate terms.

For young children:

Share with them that your tears stem from deep sadness and worry. Intruders, whom they might understand as bad people or terrorists, have caused harm to many in Israel. Reassure them that our army will find and hold them accountable. Answer their queries simply and truthfully. It's perfectly fine not to have all the answers, and it's equally important to shield them from graphic details. Let them know that bad people caused these deaths, which is profoundly sorrowful. Emphasize the strength of our army and the worldwide support, underscoring that finding these wrongdoers takes time, which is why we keep checking our phones. Remind them that our soldiers are diligently working to keep everyone safe in Israel.

It's essential to grasp that our ability to shield our children from the horrors is limited. We cannot guarantee their safety or the safe return of our loved ones. Yet, even amid this chaos, there are focal points:

- **Limit exposure to news** and electronic media.
- **Inquire what comforts them and share what comforts you** (a hug, speaking with a loved one, listening to music).
- **Embrace and cuddle them as much as possible**, for hugs significantly alleviate stress and anxiety.
- **Assist children in expressing their fears** and articulating their overwhelming emotions (fear, anger, anxiety).
- Help them identify emotional distress through physical sensations, **asking where they feel it in their bodies** (stomach ache, chest tightness, headache, tense shoulders, etc.). Clarify that emotions are registered in various parts of the body, and the body retains these memories.
- **Engage them in meaningful actions** and assign them roles, as action heightens their sense of control and reduces anxiety. Everyday tasks like folding laundry or making sandwiches can be delegated. Young children could draw pictures for the soldiers.
- **Encourage them to compile ideas for how they can help others**. Aiding others will empower and enrich them.
- **Practice anxiety-reducing exercises together**, like taking deep breaths and asking grounding questions.
- Reiterate that, despite their worry and fear, **they are safe and protected in this moment**.

A glimpse into anxiety:

In an anxiety attack, our brain locks into a survival program. The body readies itself for an emergency, curtailing non-essential functions. Blood pressure escalates, breathing quickens and becomes shallow, and our field of vision narrows. Our body and brain enter a swift and focused response mode to a perceived threat, led by the primitive brain, responsible for our survival. Once the threat subsides, our rational brain, responsible for data processing, situation assessment, and conscious decision-making, should resume control, returning the body to a state of routine and relaxation. However, during anxiety, the brain remains trapped in emergency mode, making it arduous to process new information as our focus remains fixated on the perceived threat.

When aiding an anxious child or ourselves, the objective is to relinquish control to the larger, rational brain. From there, we can decelerate, process information, center our thoughts, and ground ourselves in space and time, firmly in the present. This does not eradicate the fear, which is genuine and justified, but it empowers us to manage it. We know that increasing the sense of control diminishes anxiety. This explanation is somewhat abstract but is founded on research and validated therapeutic theories for trauma survivors. Deep breaths and grounding questions will guide your children and you back to the present moment, to the sanctuary of home and a secure environment.

We're all navigating an emotional deluge of fear and worry. This is a natural response to an abnormal reality. Permit both yourselves and the children to express, articulate, and experience the emotions evoked during these days. Yet, remind them, and yourselves, that these days will pass. The end isn't discernible now, but brighter times and days are on the horizon. Even in these grim days, there are moments of light. We must seek them, focus on them, and believe in the hope that lies ahead.