

Supporting Youth Affected by the War in Ukraine: Tips for Caregivers and Educators

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia is upsetting, as are concerns about the war escalating. Many people feel outraged by the attack on a neighboring country and related loss of innocent lives. Some people may worry about family and friends in Europe or the possibility of our service members being at risk. Others may be anxious about the threat to global security and economic stability. News coverage may be triggering to individuals who have experienced violence here at home or war in other parts of the world. Children who are or are perceived as Eastern European may be at risk of bullying or harassment by peers who feel uncertain about the future. Still other marginalized groups may feel like the news coverage and narrative minimizes experiences of violence elsewhere that has not captured this level of world attention.

At a time when youth and adults are still grappling with ongoing stressors such as the pandemic, systemic racism, and a polarizing political landscape here at home, caregivers and teachers will need to help children and youth feel safe. Adults can help them understand what is going on factually, how events do or do not affect their lives, and how to manage their emotional reactions.

KEEP EXPLANATIONS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Elementary

- Let children's questions tell you what information they need. Don't assume they are concerned about the same things you are.
- Avoid offering unnecessary frightening details.
- Provide brief, simple information with reassurance. One way to do this is with the use of a broadening technique for responding to questions (e.g., "It sounds like you have some concerns about what's next. Let's talk about how our school/community/country is striving to keep us safe.").
- Clarify misconceptions or misinformation.

Upper Elementary and Early Middle School

- Answer questions and assist in separating reality from fantasy.
- Specify the protective actions of adults.

Upper Middle and High School

- Emphasize youth's role in safety at home and at school and how to access support.
- Validate feelings and thoughts, and provide the facts needed to appraise the degree of personal threat. The NASP document "Responding to Civil Unrest in Schools" may be a helpful reference resource.
- Should youth request it, allow for conversations about political dimensions of the conflict.

IMPORTANT RISK FACTORS TO CONSIDER

The degree to which individuals are affected will vary. Children and youth (and potentially their families) at greater risk may include those who have connections to Ukraine and Russia, have loved ones in the military, have caregivers significantly affected by the conflict, have personally experienced or are refugees from violent conflict

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or war, or who suffer from PTSD, depression, or other mental illness. It is important to protect children and youth with Russian heritage or from other Eastern European backgrounds from misdirected bullying or harassment.

POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Emotional responses to unsettling circumstances vary in nature and severity from individual to individual. Nonetheless, there are some common reactions that individuals feel when their lives are affected by war or the threat of war:

- **Fear:** Fear may be the predominant reaction. This can include fear for the safety for themselves, their families, friends, and the population at large.
- **Loss of control:** The current world events are something over which people have little control. Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. Youth may grasp at any control that they have, including refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with favorite toys, or leave their caregivers.
- **Anger:** Anger is a common reaction. Unfortunately, anger is often expressed at those to whom youth are closest. Youth may direct anger toward classmates, caregivers, and neighbors. Anger often masks other emotions so adults can help youth identify and manage their underlying feelings.
- **Loss of stability:** Youth can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance.
- **Isolation:** Youth may feel isolated, or as if they're the only one having the feelings they do.
- **Confusion:** Youth may feel confused about the current conflict, what further dangers might arise, and when the violence will stop. Youth may have trouble understanding the difference between violence as entertainment or in video games and the real events taking place on the news. Some of the modern media violence is unnervingly real. Youth may have difficulty separating reality from fantasy, cartoon heroes and villains from the government soldiers. Separating the realities of war from media fantasy may require adult help.
- **Hypervigilance:** Some youth and families may feel desperate to get information about the status of family and other connections. This may cause preoccupation in thoughts, worry, and a desire to constantly scan news sources for any information about the events in the region. This may result in difficulties focusing, sleeping, and being emotionally available for school.

While this conflict may be geographically distant, it has relevance here at home, is ongoing, and is occurring in the context of the continued challenges of the pandemic and other stressors. This can contribute to more serious chronic stress and potential associated health problems. It will be important for adults to attend to the layers of challenge experienced by youth in this situation. It is critical that schools provide services and supports to help children and youth establish positive social connections and resilience.

HOW CAREGIVERS AND EDUCATORS CAN HELP

Reaffirm Safety

- Emphasize that schools are among the safest places we can be. Identify specific individuals or groups responsible for school safety.
- Share information about the international unified efforts under way to resolve the conflict.
- Monitor closely youth who may feel isolated (including those with family members or other loved ones in the military or those with connections to the conflict). As necessary, assist students to identify trust adults at school and in their community.
- Prevent stereotyping of cultures and countries. Children and youth can easily generalize negative statements being made by the media and echoed by caregiving adults. It is critical to prevent harassment of others and teach respect and empathy of those with no control over their government's actions.

Make Time to Talk

- Provide opportunity for youth to discuss concerns and to help separate real from imagined fears.
- Be patient and look for clues that a child wants to talk, but never force conversation.

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- Let the youth's questions guide the conversation and information provided.
- Encourage social connectedness and a sense of belonging with supportive others. All children and families bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge to our society. Adults should model building and emphasizing those strengths.
- Allow opportunities for youth to share their knowledge about their origins, customs, and culture.

Acknowledge and Normalize Feelings

- Never force but always allow youth to speak about feelings, and validate their reactions.
- Support and model the appropriate expression of feelings (e.g., naming feelings in self and others; listening to how others are feeling without judgment; sharing feelings using "I" messages when talking and journaling; being available and present).
- Listen, empathize, and affirm that most initial reactions are common and expected (e.g., sadness, changes in concentration, distractibility, changes in sleep or appetite).
- Understand that knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, saying, "This is really hard for you/us" will work. It is okay to acknowledge that you don't like the situation. Try to recognize the feelings underlying youth's actions and put them into words. Saying something like, "I can see you are feeling really scared about this," or "It is hard to think that your [mom, dad, other loved one] had to go so far away to help."
- Remember that it's okay to say "I don't know" when youth ask questions like "When will the conflict end?" Acknowledge how frustrating the uncertainty is by saying "It's hard not to have all the answers." Provide some reassurance by discussing actions taken by others to address safety.

Maintain a Normal Routine

- Encourage schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but do not push youth who seem overwhelmed.
- Encourage and find ways to support students in keeping a regular schedule, and foster healthy nutrition, sleep, and exercise to promote physical and mental health and well-being.

Limit Exposure to Media and Social Media

- Limit exposure to images or graphic reference to violence (e.g., on TV and social media).
- For those who are concerned for family and loved ones either deployed or in the middle of the conflict, manage and structure the amount of time they search for information.
- Consider watching the news with affected youth so you can discuss the situation factually, provide reassurance, and monitor their reactions.
- Find activities that can replace the time spent watching news or using social media (e.g., going for a walk, exercising, reading a book, talking to someone, coloring, studying, playing or listening to music).
- Take time to discuss healthy social media habits and how to know what information is accurate.

Monitor Emotional States

- Some youth will not express themselves verbally, but changes in their behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns may indicate anxiety or stress.
 - Some immature, inattentive, aggressive, or oppositional behaviors are normal reactions to the uncertainty of this situation.
 - Some youth may have difficulty at bedtime. Maintain a regular bedtime routine, but be flexible about nightlights, siblings sharing a room, sleeping with special toys, and sitting with the child as they fall asleep. Doing so typically does not cause lifelong habits.
- Children may play war, pretend to blow things up, or include images of violence in artwork and writing. This may be upsetting to adults under current circumstances, but it is one way for youth to express their awareness of events around them. Talk with youth about their art or written images and how they feel. For those who seek pretend play as an outlet, encourage role-playing of the doctors, firemen, policemen, and others who have

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helped to save lives. Decisions related to concerns raised through play or artwork are context dependent, and educators should follow guidance related to [behavior threat assessment and management](#).

- When in doubt about a youth's ability to cope, seek support from a community mental health or school-employed mental health professional.

Know the Signs of More Serious Trauma Reactions

Most children and youth will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of caring adults. However, some may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Adults should seek professional help if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms for more than 2 weeks.

- **Preschoolers:** thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary school children:** irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents:** sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

Some youth may be at increased risk of suicide because of their emotional reaction to increased stress and any preexisting mental health problems. Consult a mental health professional immediately if the youth talks about suicide or shows signs of suicidal thinking or other self-destructive behaviors. (See NASP [resources](#) for information about prevention of youth suicide.)

Teach Adaptive Coping Strategies

- Teach and model strategies to help individuals calm themselves in times of stress. Some strategies for coping include the following:
 - [Mindfulness and deep breathing](#), (examples of breathing exercises)
 - [Guided relaxation and meditation](#)
 - Journaling, coloring, and puzzles
 - Listening to calming sounds and music
 - Movement (e.g., walking, yoga, exercise routines)
 - Spending time with others, talking to a friend or adult about what is happening or how they are feeling
 - Helping students to identify who their trusted adults are in school and outside of school

FACILITATE YOUTH ADVOCACY

- Work alongside students to take actionable steps for social justice issues as appropriate to age and contexts.
- **Youth level:** Provide specific recommendations for individual students to take action.
 - Helping students be allies for peers who may be struggling, or working alongside a family affected by the conflict.
 - Assisting them to seek support or participating in programs or organizations that can help with immediate or longer-term needs.
- **School/community level:** This may include providing tools to the school as a whole to better support the student body and facilitating relationships between school and community.
 - At the school level, providing consultation to staff regarding how students may be affected and best practices.
 - Seeking out cultural partners within the community may be helpful for individual family referrals, but also partnering for events such as potential fundraisers, food or materials collection drives, and more.
 - [Opportunities for fundraising](#) for those affected by the conflict.
- **Public Arena:**
 - Following current events and assisting youth in ongoing initiatives (appropriate social media).
 - Engaging with local, state, or federal policy makers in town hall sessions for related topics (i.e., such as support for refugees).

COORDINATE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND HOME

- Educators should make sure to use communication strategies (such as newsletters, phone calls, website, [social media](#), apps) that are already in place to share critical and helpful information with families.
- Caregivers can let school personnel know if a family member is affected by the conflict being called to active duty or sent overseas. Inform teachers if your child is having difficulties and what strategies make them feel better. If necessary, seek the help of your school psychologist, counselor, or social worker.
- Educators should let caregivers know if their youth is exhibiting stress in school. Educators should provide caregivers with helpful suggestions and information related to community resources.
- Caregivers and educators should maintain general academic and behavioral expectations but also be realistic about an individual child's coping skills.
- Schools are encouraged to create a sense of collective security between home and school (e.g., concretely pointing out the adults in place that are helping keep us safe, identifying what strategies are in place to keep students safe, sharing resources and strategies for coping, modeling respect for one another, offering opportunities for students to share their thoughts and reactions with one another, providing support for families).

HOW ADULTS CAN ADDRESS THEIR OWN NEEDS

- Adults will be better able to help youth if they are coping well and taking time to address their own reactions. NASP has documents that address "[Educator Exhaustion and Burnout](#)" and "[Supporting Mental Wellness](#)." In addition, the previously mentioned strategies for adaptive coping can also be used.
- Adults should attend to the facts about developments in the conflict so as to be prepared to answer youth's questions. However, it is ok to say, "I do not know."
- Adults should seek peer support, take care of their own physical and mental health, and avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better. The NASP document "[Care for the Caregivers: Tips for Families and Educators](#)" is a useful resource.

NASP RESOURCES

- [Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home](#)
- [Addressing Grief: Tips for Caregivers and Educators](#)
- [BTAM Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools](#)
- [Care for the Caregivers: Tips for Families and Educators](#)
- [Educator Exhaustion and Burnout](#)
- [Prevention of Youth Suicide Resources](#)
- [Promoting Compassion and Acceptance in Crisis](#)
- [Responding to Civil Unrest](#)
- [Social Media and School Crisis](#)
- [Supporting Mental Wellness: Tips for Caregivers](#)
- [Supporting Mental Wellness: Tips for Educators](#)
- [Supporting Vulnerable Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Parents](#)
- [Lesson Plan, Student Psychoeducational Groups in School Crisis Intervention: The PREPaRE Model](#)

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