

WAR FAR AWAY – FEAR AT HOME

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

After we wrote a special letter to the educational staff in late February 22 because of the war in Ukraine, this letter is now expressly addressed at parents of students who are children or adolescents. Cooperation between schools and parents is needed in times of crisis.

Dear Parents and Educators,

Suddenly, we find ourselves directly confronted with war in Europe. The media have reported non-stop on Russia's attack on Ukraine. Many children, adolescents and adults now struggle with fear and worry and cannot understand the situation.

This letter may assist you as parents and educators with helping your children deal with their fears and worries about the current situation and future.

How should you deal with fear and worry in daily family life?

Understand your own fear and worry

Both children and adolescents and adults are worried. It may thus be helpful to ask yourself what, exactly, you are worried about. Is it the fear of war in your country? Is it worries about financial hardship? Is it anger towards the perpetrators of war? Is it something entirely different? Determine where you stand on this situation before discussing it with your children. Younger children, in particular, accept the judgments and opinions of their attachment figures. It is therefore important for you to be aware of your own feelings without being overwhelmed by them during discussions. Suggestions are offered further below in this letter.

Your children are allowed to know that you may not have an answer to every question and are worried. But you should give them security and comfort.

Speaking with your children

Be open to discussing the current situation if your children ask you about it. If you see that your child is

agitated, openly ask, "What's on your mind?" Older children and adolescents, in particular, will of course hear a lot through the media, at school and from friends. Allow them to discuss their concerns and ask questions. Build on what your child already knows. Help order these facts.

Active listening is important in these discussions. What does your child think? Which images are in their head? What questions do they have? Take your child's fears and concerns seriously. They may have seen images they cannot understand. The younger the child, the less likely they will be able to contextualise and process certain subjects and images. For example, if a child sees a tank rolling through a city on television, the child may not be aware that this is happening in their hometown or vicinity. Help your child answer their own questions. It is fine if you don't know or understand everything about the situation. It is most important to convey security and show your child that you are always there for them.

Take children's questions seriously

One possibility is to specifically refer to your daily life in conversations: children are familiar with conflicts from pre-school or school. Wars are large conflicts between countries. They often concern possession and ownership of things—like conflicts between children. Information suitable for children is provided by the *Sendung mit der Maus* and the children's news programme *logo!* on ZDF (see the links to these websites at the end of this letter).

Be honest, but child-friendly and easy to understand in conversations. Ask what image your child has of the situation. It is normal for your child to ask the same question more than once. Your child may want assurance.

If you cannot answer a question, try to find the answer together. Allow yourself to not be able to answer every question.

“I am worried too and can’t answer all of your questions. Let’s try to better understand and handle the situation together. I am always there for you.”

Another possibility is to explain the positive developments and efforts of other countries:

“Many countries are discussing how and doing everything they can to end the war as quickly as possible. There is hope that many people can be helped.”

Such discussions should be held in a relaxed atmosphere. Be sure to have such discussions at the “right” moment when your child is ready. For example, avoid such conversations before bedtime. Some children may not want to talk about it and prefer to draw or play. This is also normal. War doesn’t need to play a big part in a child’s daily life. This should be possible, but guided by you.

Age-appropriate responses and explanations

Older adolescents and young adults may partly understand the war’s economic, geopolitical and historic backgrounds. And they may want to discuss these backgrounds with their parents. However, children and younger adolescents don’t have to understand these things and should focus on how they are doing here and now. Feelings may also differ depending on age. Stay open and offer discussions that are appropriate to your child.

Watch discussions between children and adolescents

Especially if you have children who are different ages, discussions about the war may differ greatly. Ask your older children not to overburden their younger siblings. Emphasise that younger children cannot and do not have to understand everything yet. In general, the war should not be discussed solely among the children, but with the family or between children and their parents. Set aside time to discuss this matter to prevent it from taking up too much space during the day. Also be attentive and ask if and how your children are discussing this subject with their peers. Explain that not everything other (older) children say is necessarily true. Emphasise that your child can always come to you and their teachers at school with questions and concerns.

Continue daily life and maintain normalcy

Contentious issues, such as the Covid pandemic, often have us suspend daily life and ask what we should do and change now. This is appropriate for adjusting to a new situation. But be sure to maintain your child’s structures and rituals (e.g. having meals, reading, playing and cuddling together and bringing your child to bed). These strengthen emotional security and provide comfort and stability to your child.

The current situation often puts parents and adolescents in a dilemma: can I do something fun with my children or friends while others are suffering? For children, it is important to continue daily life which includes fun and joy.

Keep moving

Physical movement, especially outdoors, will improve your mood. Motivate your child and yourself to go outside and move a little every day. This does not require high athletic performance; a walk will do.

Dealing with feelings of helplessness

War often makes onlookers feel powerless. There is seemingly nothing one can do from the outside to influence the course of events. Think of a way together to make your child feel like they are having an impact. Is there anything you could do, for example, to assist Ukrainian refugees?

Being there for each other

Discussing current problems and feelings together can especially create new bonds. Children and adolescents may also be relieved to know that others have similar concerns. You may also consider regular “feeling check-ins” by, for example, quickly asking your child how they are doing after school or before going to bed. You may also perform simple “smiley checks” on younger children by asking them how they are feeling and why they are feeling this way:

“How are you feeling? Why is that so?”



Be attentive

Feelings of fear, anger and sadness are completely normal and should be permitted. If your child feels like they are overwhelmed by emotion, it may help to focus on something specific in the current moment, such as breathing, feet on the floor or a picture on the wall. Some children may also benefit from breathing exercises:

- 4 seconds of long deep breaths through the nose
- 4 seconds of holding one's breath
- 4 seconds of breathing out through the mouth
- 4 seconds of holding one's breath before breathing in

Be careful of media consumption

For the wellbeing especially of your younger children, don't allow them to see images of war that they may have difficulty processing. The media are currently flooding us with news about the war in Ukraine. This multitude of information makes it difficult for many to make up their own minds. If you notice your children consuming a lot of media, explain to them that, while it is good to stay informed, too much information may also cause one to lose sight of real life. Show your children that time spent offline away from the conscious consumption of information—ideally with you—is good and important. Perhaps your children already had such discussions at school and on which you can then build.

Irritability and aggression

The primary feelings are currently fear of and worry about the war. There is also an increased likelihood of irritability and aggression at home and at school. Uncertainty can be nerve-racking and make people irritable. Especially after 2 years of the pandemic, many people's "batteries are empty" and

the tense political situation leads to anger, frustration and aggression. This may be amplified when people from Ukraine and Russia meet each other here. Explain to your children that their Russian neighbours are not responsible for the war. These people are probably also suffering from the conflict and wish for peace. If you see children harassing each other, ask them why they are doing that. Explain that war in Ukraine doesn't mean that we should be fighting here.

Prevent discrimination and prejudice

Children and adults from or with relatives in Russia or Ukraine may face prejudice or even be treated as responsible for the war. Prejudice may form quickly and result in conflict. To prevent discrimination and stigmatisation, you, as an educator, have to watch your language. To avoid attributions, don't juxtapose groups, such as "the Russians" and the "the Ukrainians", but discuss developments and actions that lead to conflict. Speak of "people from Ukraine/Russia" or "people fleeing from the war".

Integrate refugee children and adolescents into school and daily life

Ukrainian refugee children and adolescents may also attend your children's or welcoming classes. This may lead to curiosity, but perhaps also to shyness of the children and adolescents here. Help your children approach refugee children or adolescents. Discuss first interactions with your children: your children may ask if the new kid or adolescent would like to play, can explain something or arrived safely. Especially if neither speaks the other's language, use images to ask, e.g. if the new kid/adolescent would like to play football. Encourage your child to be creative! Explain to your child that the escape is not a good topic for a first conversation. Daily life and arrival should be assisted as much as possible, especially if your child or family speak Ukrainian or Russian and can help with translations.

What to do with my worries?

As parents or educators, you are the most important reference persons and first contact persons for your children. You give them security, explain the world and, given the circumstances, enable them to develop safely. It is therefore important for parents and educators to be able to support their children as much as possible. As addressed at the beginning of this letter, adults also have fears and worries. All

points discussed above also apply to you as an adult. Worries can easily seem overpowering and be perceived as the actual future. It is therefore especially important to emphasise that worries and negative thoughts are just that—worries and thoughts. They do not have to become real. Remain able to act and see what you can do for yourself in your daily life. You will be better able to provide your children with security and comfort if you are in a stable, well-balanced place yourself. If you find the current situation difficult, you may also contact the institutions listed below.

Strengthen resilience

Resilience is a person's psychological ability to withstand crises. Resilience is therefore acquired primarily when dealing with difficult topics and when handling stressful experiences. Central elements are:

- *Acceptance.* What do I have to accept as it is? Acceptance includes accepting feelings and oneself. If a situation can be changed, this should of course be considered.
- *Optimism.* What in my life is good? What am I grateful for? This is about seeing the good during difficult times.
- *Focusing on solutions.* What are possible solutions? Which steps can I take?
- *Strengthening ability to act.* What can I do? Where can I do something? I may not be able to end the war in Ukraine, but I can go to demonstrations, support people, etc. Adolescents especially have creative ideas—talk to them!
- *Taking responsibility.* How can I assist my neighbours? Responsibility especially refers to one's direct surroundings, e.g. in one's city.
- *Solidarity.* Who feels like me? Who can support me? Who can I support?
- *Planning for the future.* What future do I see for myself and my family? What can I do to reach this future?

Three things

A good way to appreciate the small things in daily life is to every day write down three things for which you are thankful. This may be one of the first warm days of the year, a beautiful moment with your children or time for yourself. Focusing on the moment often helps prevent worries from becoming overpowering. This can also be a ritual with your child when you discuss the good things about the day at night.

Own media consumption

Also be aware of and set times for your media consumption as parents. "Too much" news about the war often leads to feelings of helplessness and perceptions of the world as unsafe. Avoid consuming news in the presence of young children.

Do something nice for yourself!

Take time for yourself, if possible. If you notice that you have no more resources to support your children, private support (e.g. from your partner, family or friends), but also professional support (e.g. at school) should be considered. An important requirement for your child's wellbeing is your own wellbeing. It is completely valid and important for you to be well and have fun.

If you need more external support, please do not hesitate to take advantage of our services.

Counselling from SIBUZ / school psychologists

For further information and offers, please contact your local SIBUZ.

<https://www.berlin.de/sen/bildung/unterstuetzung/beratungszentren-sibuz/>

Links and further information (in German)

- Compilation of information and links for children and parents about the war in Ukraine from Trier University: <https://www.uni-trier.de/universitaet/fachbereiche-faecher/fachbereich-i/faecher-und-institute/psychologie/professuren/klinische-psychologie-und-psychotherapie-des-kindes-und-jugendalters/aktuelles>

- Children's news: <https://www.zdf.de/kinder/logo/krieg-russland-ukraine-102.html>

- DGKJP- handout entitled “Facts for Families – Talking about the War”: https://www.dgkjp.de/wp-content/uploads/Fakten-fuer-Familien-Ueber-Krieg-reden_02032022-1.pdf

- Sendung mit der Maus:
<https://www.wdrmaus.de/extras/mausthemen/ukraine/index.php5>



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