

How to Talk to Young Children About War

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ZERO TO THREE is here support you as you serve your community during this uncertain time.



During reports of military crisis, armed conflict and tragedy, early childhood professionals may find themselves with families directly impacted by the conflict through friends and family, service members in the family, or stress and fear from news of the violence.

ZERO TO THREE suggests these tips for parents and caregivers of babies and young children facing trauma:

1. Pay attention to your facial expression and body language. Your baby or young child is watching your nonverbal cues to decide whether they are safe. Take a moment to breathe and relax your face and shoulders. These small physical shifts go a long way in creating a solid sense of safety for your child.



2. Notice your tone. It's perfectly normal during this time to have anxiety in your voice, but your baby can sense your fear at as early as 3 months. Stay in the present moment. The larger picture may be downright scary. But if everyone is physically safe, remind yourself that you and your family are okay. By being aware of your tone, and keeping your voice calm, you can help your little one feel safe.

3. Keep routines consistent. You will surely be stressed and overwhelmed, but try to keep your young child's daily schedule as normal as possible. It can help your child if you can maintain some of the routines of their day-to-day lives, such as predictable meals and bedtimes. Knowing what to expect can help children feel physically and emotionally safe—it might help you feel more grounded as well.

4. Shield your child from frightening conversations or images. Keep the details of the violence away from your children as much as possible. Babies can experience fear early in life, starting at 3-5 months.

1. Play, sing, and tell stories. While you may not feel much like playing, try to find some time to connect with your child in a playful way. This is a form of normalcy for them and helps them feel close to you.
2. Know that during this time your child may seem to lose some skills they've already gained. For example, a child who is potty-trained may begin having accidents or a child who's a good sleeper may begin waking up at night. Your child may also show less self-confidence and independence and want to stay close to you and be held more than usual. This "clinginess" is a way for them to feel safe and close to you, which is so important to them now.
3. You may find that your child cries or fusses more or seems to be very withdrawn, especially after a stressful event. This means that children are still feeling unsure and unsettled. They will need extra cuddling, play, and attention during this time, which can be tough because it's likely you will be facing many emotions and needs as well. Be sure to tell your child when you have to leave him or her (avoid "sneaking out"), and consider using a routine—like a special kiss or song—to make the goodbye easier. If your child's behaviors persist, think about talking with his or her healthcare provider or seeking out a mental health provider with experience in supporting young children. It is common for both children and adults to need some additional support following a scary and sometimes traumatic event.

Partner Resources

Joy D. Osofsky, PhD, board member and past President of both ZERO TO THREE and the World Association for Infant Mental Health and Howard J. Osofsky, MD, PhD, offer these resources to help parents and professionals support both themselves and young children experiencing traumatic events.

- [The Importance of Self-Care During, and Following Terrorism and War](#)
- [Considerations for Young Children During and After Terrorism and War](#)

