

# TALKING ABOUT WAR

Questions and answers about  
war for parents and caregivers  
of children and young people



# INTRODUCTION

**News, images and conversations about war can be found everywhere. Children and young people** wonder and ask about what they mean. **Adults** wonder about what to tell them, and how to talk about it.

**War can deeply affect children and young people – how they think, and how they feel.** Even when it happens thousands of miles away, it can jeopardise their need to see the world as a safe, predictable place.

**Parents and educators want to protect them, but at the same time encourage them to be curious and experience the world.** We want them to prioritise peaceful ways of solving problems and conflicts, and to discover what they can do to help make the world a better place. **The best way to do this is to make ourselves available to listen to their concerns, to talk to them, and to answer their questions.**



## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT WAR?

Fortunately, most children and young people live in non-violent environments. However, this does not mean that Parents and Educators should not talk to them about violence, violent conflicts, war and peace processes.

In fact, **children and young people – even remotely – are directly or indirectly exposed to violent situations and events from a very early age** (for example, through what they hear and see in the media). Most children, even at preschool age, are aware of what is going on around them, and absorb information about things like war from adult conversations and news they watch on TV.

If war is frightening for adults, it can be downright terrifying for children and young people (who often don't even fully understand what is happening). When children and young people see images on television of countries at war, refugee children, injured people or mass graves, **they may experience fear, pain or confusion.**

Therefore, from a very early age, **it is important to talk to children and young people about war**, giving them **information that is appropriate to their age, the ability to understand and experiences**, assuring them that they can **feel safe and protected.**

### IMPORTANT

If small children are not interested in talking about war, there is no need to do so. In particular, very young children should not be forced to know that a war exists, if we think they may not learn about it in any other way. In the case of children who do not want to talk about it, it is important to show that you will always be willing to do so if they so wish.



## WON'T CHILDREN FEEL EVEN MORE FRIGHTENED IF WE TALK ABOUT WAR?

**No.** The important thing is that we listen to the child/young person and respond to them in a sensitive way, trying to support them in what they are thinking and feeling. As much as talking about violence, conflict and war can be scary and cause fear, **it is even scarier to think that no one can talk us through** these feelings.

Keeping quiet and not talking about difficult things, or topics that cause unpleasant emotions and feelings, can heighten a child's/young person's fear that we cannot handle the issue and take care of them. **Children and young people need to know that adults can talk about difficult topics and feelings** and are there to help them do the same.

Talking about war with children and young people allows Parents and Car-givers to understand what they know about the subject, correct possible misconceptions, filter the information they access and how they access it, open communication channels (for this and other conversations) and, above all, **convey safety and confidence.**



## DO CHILDREN/YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT A WAR IS? WHAT DO THEY THINK AND FEEL ABOUT IT?

War is not easy to understand or accept, even for adults. After all, violence is in direct contrast with the messages of respect, kindness, peace and compassion that adults are always repeating to **children and young people. However, children and young people do understand what suffering is.** Even if it is difficult for them to grasp abstract ideas – especially for very small children – they often find analogies in their own experiences that allow them to understand the concept of a war.



In the face of war, it is **natural for children and young people to feel confused, upset, anxious, scared, worried or sad.** They may fear for their own safety, and the safety of their family and friends. They may show **changes in sleep patterns** (such as having nightmares, difficulty falling asleep or waking up earlier than usual), **changes in behaviour**, loss of **appetite** or difficulty in **paying attention and concentrating.**

Younger children may find it harder to be away from their Parents and Caregivers, and have more dependency, irritability, or tantrums. Older children may also be more irritable and aggressive, show a lack of attention or have changes in behaviour at school. Young people may reveal pessimistic views towards life, people or the future, mood swings and isolation.

In the case of younger children, particularly if they are not exposed to news about war, **there may also be no reaction.** At this age, children will react more to the suffering and stress of Parents and Caregivers. They may be more dependent, require more physical contact, wake up more often during the night, whine more or adopt behaviours from when they were even younger.

### IMPORTANT

Children who are experiencing violence, divorce or the death of a family member may be at higher risk of experiencing more anxiety and more behavioural changes.

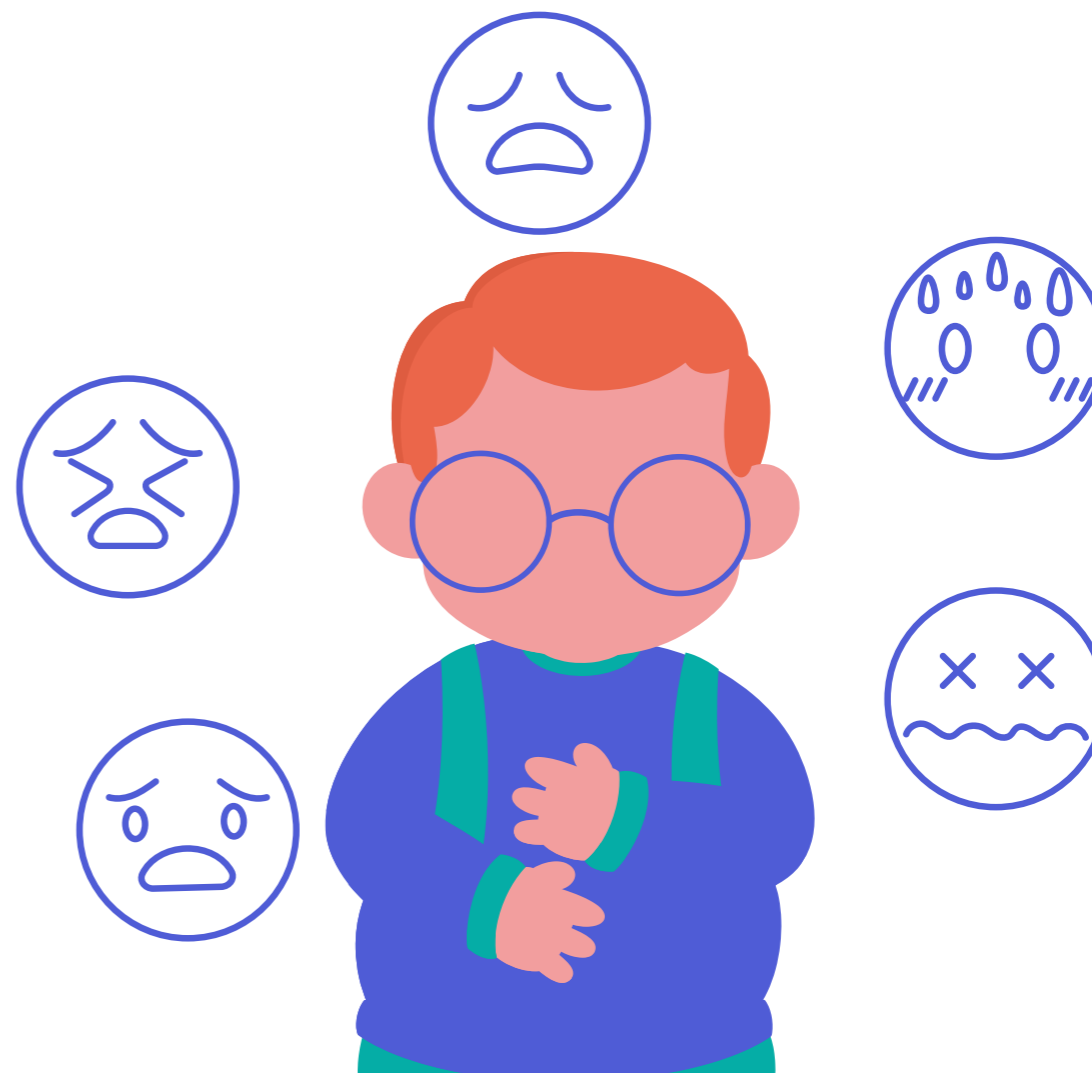
## HOW SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT WAR?

Talking about war with children and young people can be daunting and complex in and of itself. Here are some suggestions that may help:

○ **Allow the child/young person to express their thoughts and feelings.** Let the child/young person know that we are there to listen, and to talk about the issue. Ask them what they think about war, and if they are scared or worried. Even if they answer “no”, we are showing them that it is normal to have these feelings, and that they can talk about them if they want to. Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings or fears, but may feel more comfortable drawing, playing or telling stories directly or indirectly related to what is happening. It is also normal for them to ask the same questions or make the same comments over and over again, until the information makes sense.

○ **Listen and find out what the child/young person already knows.** Even more important than explaining or providing information about war is to listen to what the child spontaneously wants to comment on or ask about. The best approach is to let children’s concerns, in their own words, guide the direction and depth of the conversation. We can also elicit their opinions by asking open-ended questions, such as “*have you heard about the war that’s going on?*”. Children/young people may have already come into contact with information about war through the media, school or friends. Finding out what they already know can be a good starting point for a conversation. We should also be aware of what they don’t say - their facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice, for example, can also reveal emotions.

○ **Validate the child’s/young person’s feelings.** It is important to communicate to the child that we understand that what is happening with this war is confusing and complicated. It isn’t very helpful when someone tells us “*Don’t worry!*” about something that is bothering us, so we should avoid saying this to children and young people. For example, saying “*you look sad when we talk about this; I’m sad too,*” communicates to the child that these feelings are natural and understandable, and that the adult feels the same, and is learning to cope. Do not judge the child/young person for how they feel, even if it seems to make little sense to us. If we don’t understand something, we should be respectful, and ask them to explain it again.



○ **Tailor language and information to the child's/young person's age.**

For example, to a younger child we might say, *"some people in other countries disagree on things that are important to them. And sometimes when this happens, there is a war. The war is happening far away, and we are not in any danger. We are safe."* Although it is important to be honest and not downplay how serious war is, there is also no need to overwhelm the child/young person with unnecessary information that they may not be able to process. It is essential to also consider each child's/young person's experiences and circumstances (for instance, if they have a parent in the military).

○ **Reassure children and young people that they are safe and protected.**

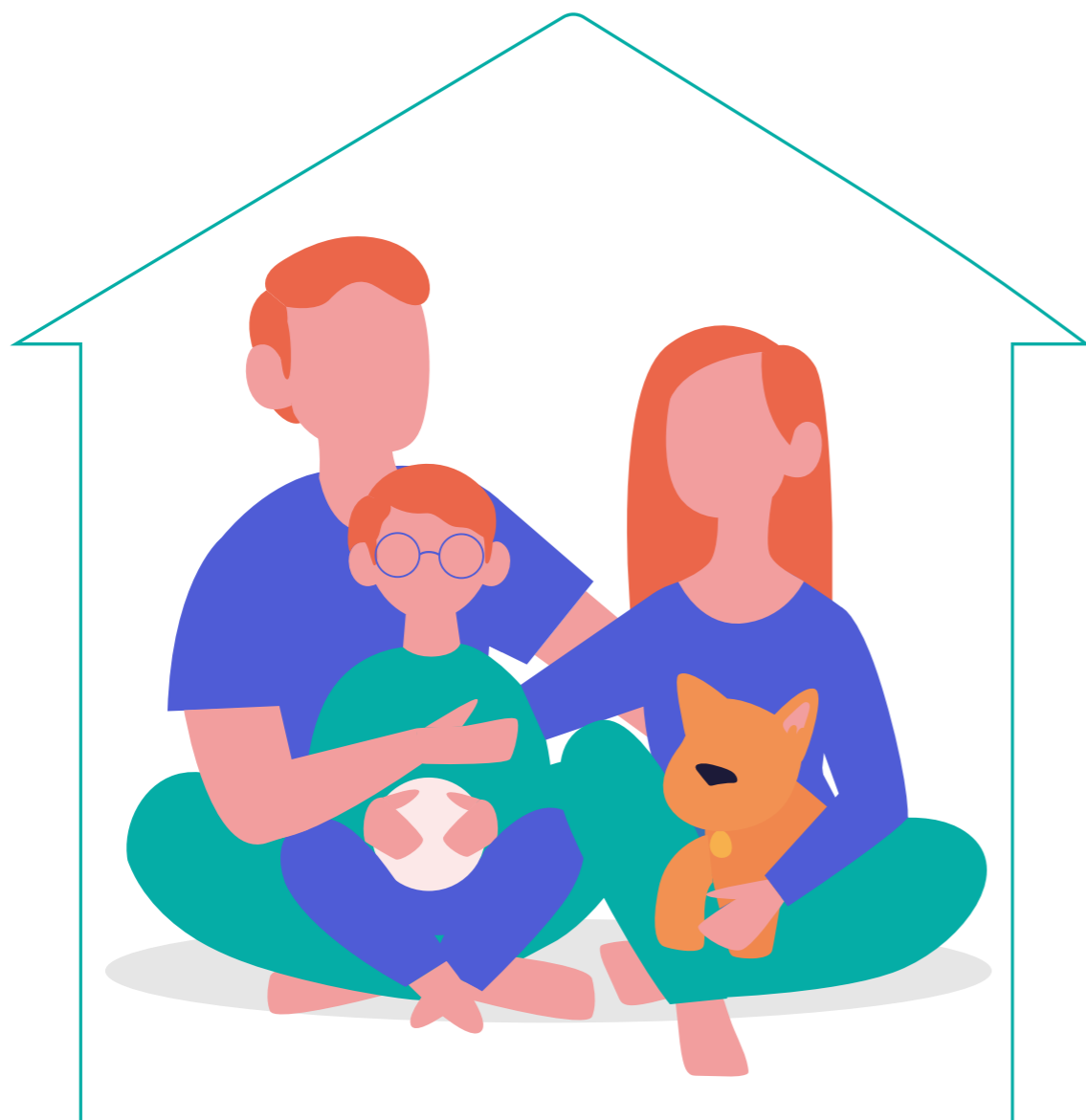
In particular, very young children can interpret things in a way that is illogical to adults, and that can cause them fears. For example, they may think that *"if there is a war on TV, there may also be one at school,"* or *"if a missile can fly there, it could also fly to my home."* Therefore, it is important to reiterate to them that they are safe and protected (and so is their family). Reinforcing physical contact (e.g., hugs, kisses) and keeping up usual routines are also good ideas.

○ **Emphasize that there is hope, and there are many people trying to help.**

Even in terrible situations such as war, we will always find people working hard to help others (politicians and diplomats, but also doctors, nurses, soldiers, police, firefighters and volunteers). Focusing on these acts of courage, kindness, and helping others reminds children and young people that, in the face of great adversity and evil, there are always acts of humanity and love between people. It is also important to emphasize that all wars end, and that there can be non-violent solutions towards peace.

○ **Watch the news with older children and young people.**

In the case of younger children, it is important to restrict access to media information, to keep them from being exposed to potentially disturbing images and information (not only through television, but also the Internet). In the case of older children and young people, the best approach is to read or watch the news together, encouraging them to give their opinion and ask questions (limiting these moments to no more than once/twice a day).





○ **Avoid stereotypes.** Whatever our views may be on a war or the countries involved, we should avoid polarising images and language pitting the “good guys” against the “bad guys”, the “right side” against the “enemies” or the “good countries” against the “bad ones”. It is also important not to stereotype groups of people by their cultural identity, nationality or religion. In fact, this can be an opportunity to promote tolerance and compassion, respect for everyone and for diversity, as well as to explain what prejudices and stereotypes are. In the case of older children, we can also help them understand that war has consequences – individual and social – on both sides. Talking about the complexity of war can encourage young people to be more empathetic and sensitive to different points of view.

○ **Use the conversation to encourage discussion of other topics.** A conversation about war can evolve into a conversation about other difficult issues in our lives. We can use it to encourage children and young people to develop in other areas. For example, we can take the opportunity to talk about how to help people we don’t know, or how to solve situations of conflict or bullying.

○ **Encourage pro-social behaviour.** Children and young people can feel more secure and confident when they feel they can do something to help. Therefore, we can encourage their pro-social behaviour by discussing ways they can help make a difference (for example, donating material goods to institutions that help children affected by war, or writing a letter to policy-makers or a local newspaper). One of the first steps can also be to learn more about the subject and organise a discussion group with colleagues or people in the community.

○ **Monitor the stress and Psychological Health of children and young people.** War can affect some children more than others. It is normal for them to feel confused, upset or anxious. However, persisting changes in behaviour and sleep, constant concern about the subject or a fear of death can be warning signs. Try filling out the [How Do I Feel? Checklist \(about Children and Adolescents, for Parents, Educators and Teachers\)](#). In this case, it is important to seek help from a psychologist.

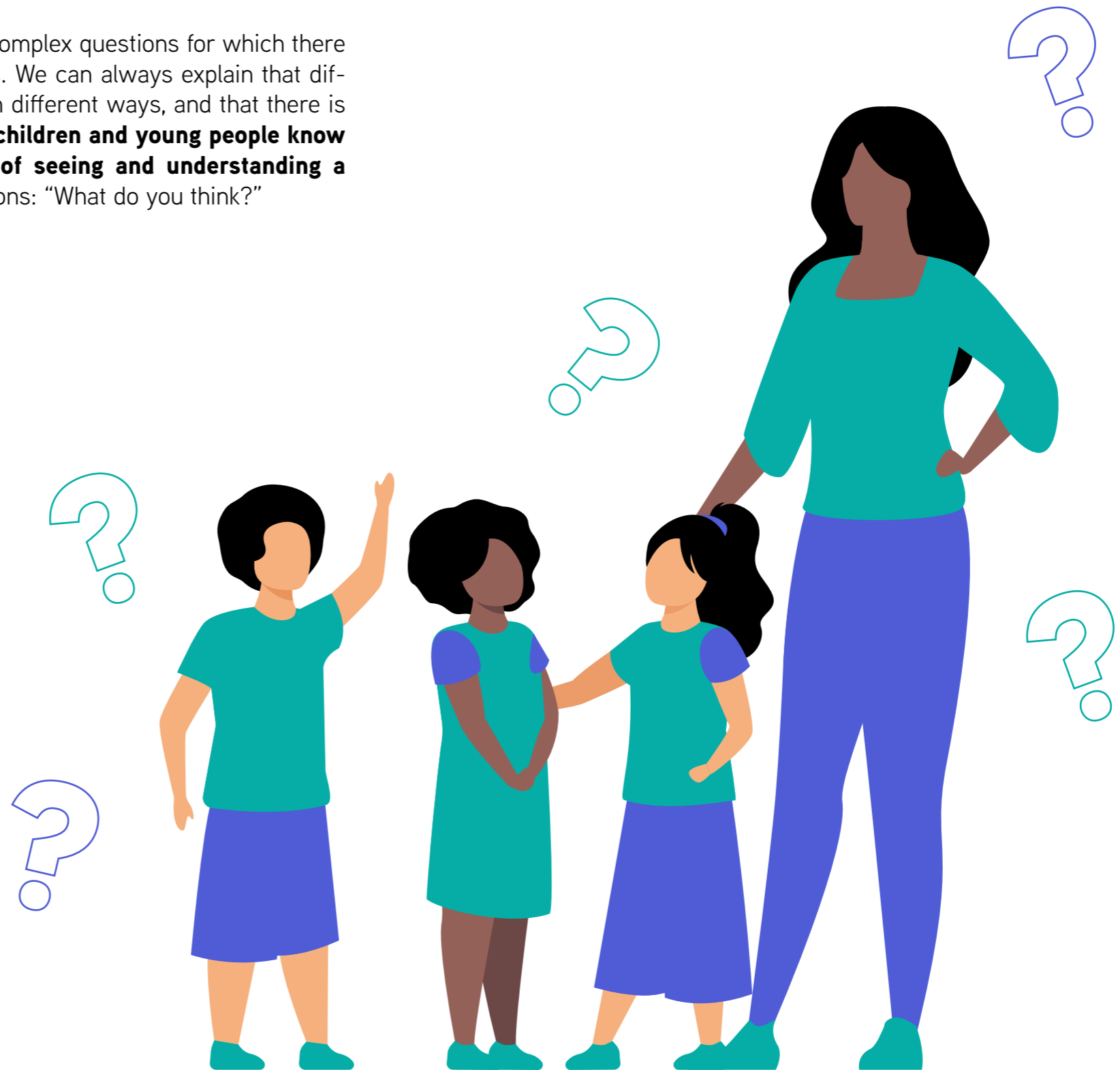
○ **Monitor and care for your Psychological Health.** Children and young people learn to deal with adversity and what happens around them by observing how the adults in their lives do it. For this reason, it is important to know that the way we respond to stress and communicate about the issue of war will influence the reaction of the children and young people we care for. It is normal for us to feel anxious about war as well, and we can tell the child or young person that we also have fear – without overwhelming them with our emotions, but instead focusing on how we are dealing with these feelings. We as adults can model the idea that there are indeed very difficult and scary things in the world, but also that they can be overcome (and how). Check out the [How Do I Feel? Checklist](#) for adults.

## IMPORTANT

We don’t need to have all the answers. We don’t need to be experts on a subject to listen to what children and young people think and feel. In addition, thinking together about something complex can help older children deal with ambivalent feelings and ambiguous thoughts: “That’s an interesting question, and I don’t know the answer. We can think about it together. What do you think?” This process of seeking and discussing ideas and information also helps to show children and young people that it is possible to understand what is happening around us and find solutions to problems. It can also be worthwhile to say something like “I don’t know the answer, and I’m not sure anyone does... but I know that many people in the world are trying to understand and solve this issue.”

# HOW SHOULD SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WAR BE ANSWERED?

Children and young people may ask us complex questions for which there are no clear or straightforward answers. We can always explain that different people think about these issues in different ways, and that there is no single answer – **it is important that children and young people know that there are different perspectives of seeing and understanding a conflict.** We can also return their questions: “What do you think?”



# EVEN SO, WE WILL NOW OFFER SOME TIPS FOR ANSWERING SOME OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

## WHAT IS WAR?

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War happens when countries or groups of people disagree about something important to everyone, but use violent means to fight against each other. Wars can happen between different countries, or between groups of people in the same country. Unfortunately, wars have always existed.

## WHY DO WARS EXIST?

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Wars can happen for many reasons. For example, a country may feel that it does not have enough land or resources, and may try to get them by forcibly taking them from another country. But wars can also happen because one country wants to “impose its way of thinking and seeing the world”.

## IS OUR FRIEND/FAMILY MEMBER GOING TO DIE?

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You’re worried that something might happen to him/her, and we’ll never see him/her again, right? We’re all worried. But our friend/family member is not alone, and there are many people trying to protect him/her. Let’s hope he/she returns home safely, and as soon as possible. *(Particularly when a relative of the child/young person is actually in danger, it is not appropriate to minimise their concerns, nor to give them an absolute certainty [“it will be okay”] that we ourselves do not have. It is better to acknowledge and share our fears).*

## ARE GRANDPA AND GRANDMA OKAY?

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Yes, they are fine. They live a long way away from where the war is happening. Do you want to call and talk to them? *(It is common for children of all ages to imagine an immediate risk to their family and friends).*

## WILL THEY ATTACK US TOO?

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The war is happening far away from us, so you don’t have to worry about attacks or bombs destroying our home. Let’s all stick together. *(It is common for children of all ages to imagine an immediate risk to themselves).*

## WHY DO SOME PEOPLE KILL OTHER PEOPLE?

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I don’t have an answer to that question, since I don’t understand it either. In fact, no one should ever kill another person, and we should all help to make sure this doesn’t happen.

## HOW CAN WE TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WAR TO EDUCATE ABOUT NON-VIOLENCE AND BUILD PEACE?

War, like other crises, and even if it is an extreme situation, can be seen as an opportunity to learn and grow. **We can, for example, educate about non-violence** by helping children and young people internalise the idea that problems and conflicts can be solved peacefully, and by helping them learn how to do so. For example:

- **Show empathy.** Children and young people learn to respect, ask about and be interested in the other's perspective by watching us do it.
- **Help identify and express anger and rage.** Violence often has, at its root, emotions such as anger and rage. Therefore, it is important that we help children and young people to recognise these emotions (what goes on in our bodies, what we think, how we feel when we are angry) and understand that they are normal and common to all human beings. We should also help them identify coping mechanisms (such as breathing deeply, going for a run or talking to someone about what made us angry) to keep these emotions from turning into aggressive behaviour.
- **Spell out specific expectations about how to relate with others.** Simply saying "behave yourself at school" is not enough: it is important to be specific and say, for example, "respect your classmates, even if they have a different opinion than you do."



○ **Show that it is possible to fix and remedy our mistakes.** When children’s/young people’s actions harm another person, it is important that we talk to them, helping them to take responsibility, apologise and understand how they can remedy the harm they have caused (*“what can you say or do to help your friend feel better?”*).

○ **Demonstrate the steps required to solve a problem.** Sometimes, in our desire to protect them, we try to solve children’s and young people’s problems for them by offering quick solutions. However, it is more helpful when we help them learn and follow these important steps:

## IMPORTANT STEPS

- 1) identify the problem (by asking simple questions that help define it)
- 2) evaluate different possible solutions (encouraging them to think about as many solutions as possible, and the advantages and disadvantages of each one)
- 3) try out a solution (reminding them that, if the chosen solution doesn’t work, there are others)
- 4) evaluate the result (helping them think about the degree of satisfaction and consequences of the chosen option)

○ **Value non-violence efforts and skills.** It is important to recognise and appreciate children’s and young people’s efforts to solve conflicts and problems without resorting to violence, to express their emotions in a healthy way, and to understand and help others. **It is important to talk to children and young people about the efforts that we as communities and societies can make to promote and build dialogue, bridges, justice and peace.**

