

**Talking to Children About  
WAR AND CONFLICT**

**GUIDANCE FOR  
TEACHERS**



# INTRODUCTION

## WHO IS IT FOR?

- Teachers
- School staff
- Other professionals working with children

## WHAT DOES IT INCLUDE?

- A brief introduction to secondary trauma and why discussions with children about war, conflict, and other significant world events are an important part of the teacher role.
- Guidance to support you in having discussions with children about these topics.
- Guidance to support your own response to these topics.
- Reflective questions to support your practice
- Resources and signposting to guide next steps.



# CONTEXT

Evidence shows us that people can suffer adverse, long-term consequences of traumatic incidents just by hearing about them, and children are likely to be particularly susceptible to this due to limited understanding. This is sometimes referred to as **secondary trauma**.

It is important to remember that it is impossible to protect children from frightening and confusing world events, such as war and conflict. We can, however, make sure that they are getting accurate information and that they have opportunities to ask questions. When talking to children and young people about war and conflict, it is important to consider their age, stage of development, and any additional needs that may impact how they engage with these discussions.

War and conflict often has its roots in a complex political discourse that can be challenging for adults, let alone children, to understand. Currently, you will be aware of conflict happening in Israel and Palestine. There will be different perceptions, perspectives and belief systems within your school community, and for this reason support for students should focus on facts and feelings. Think with students about how they feel, how others feel, and how your school community can contribute towards help and support for the situation.

Teachers will need to consider who in their class might be particularly affected by the news, for example those who have family in affected areas, those who are part of communities experiencing hate and discrimination as a result of the conflict, or those who are already dealing with distressing life events. These type of world events can be particularly stressful to deal with when we are already dealing with psychological distress or painful transitions.



# THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Children's own attitudes towards, and reactions, to traumatic events are closely linked to how they perceive adults around them to have responded. The children in your class will have different experiences of talking to adults about war and conflict. For many children, the conversations they have with their teachers about war and conflict might be the most informative and reassuring conversations they have.

Talking to children about war and conflict might happen during formal discussions, for example in assembly, during circle time, or in relevant subject lessons. You might also have conversations with children about war and conflict in response to them asking you questions, or you noticing a change in a child's mood or behaviour during or following a significant world event.

It is important that you and your colleagues have a clear, shared approach to these conversations and that you feel well supported before and after these conversations. Research carried out with teachers in Hammersmith and Fulham schools highlighted the following factors as important when talking to children about significant events:

- A whole-school shared approach and shared language to help staff feel confident about how they were talking to children.
- Teachers supporting each other using the same approach and language as they were using with their children.
- Clear guidelines about what to say, and more importantly what *not* to say.
- Regular check-ins from senior leadership teams to ensure teachers felt able to have these conversations, with consideration given to their own emotional responses to world events.
- Opportunities to debrief or reflect after challenging conversations with students.
- Working closely with parents and the wider school community to promote shared understanding and shared language.
- We can help our children best when we are feeling as calm and clear as possible. Notice what is coming up for you, and catch those early signs of stress, anxiety or worry.

**"HOW CAN I LET THESE KIDS KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING, OR WHAT WE THINK IS HAPPENING... WITHOUT... SCARING THEM?"**

**"...IT'S JUST HARD TO KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION, 'CAUSE YOU'RE KIND OF HAVING TO DEAL WITH IT AND PROCESS INFORMATION YOURSELF."**

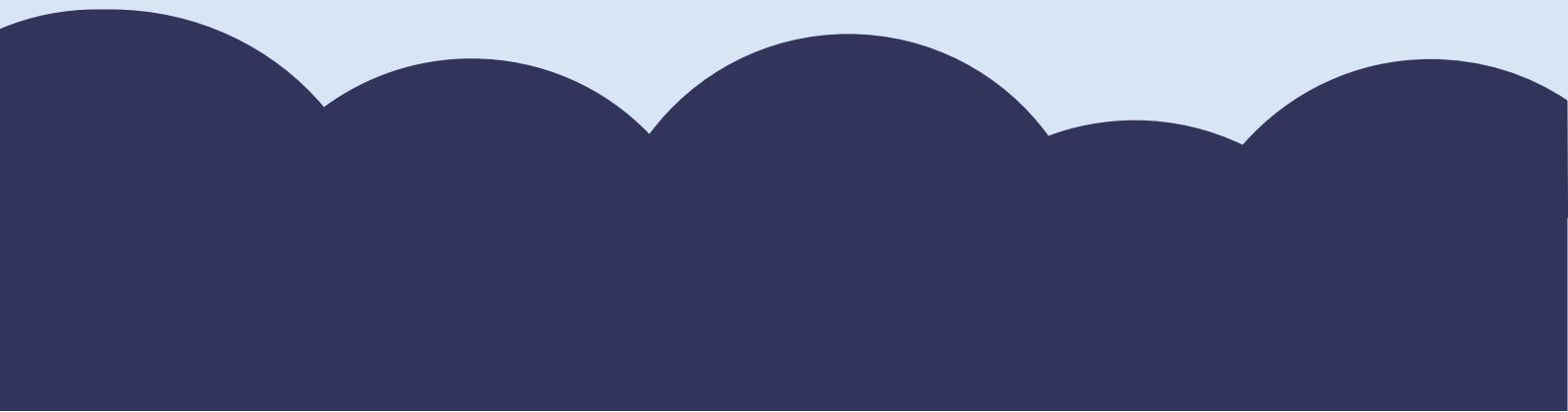
**"I FELT A HUGE AMOUNT OF RESPONSIBILITY TO DO IT PROPERLY, BUT YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE ANY GUIDANCE FOR THAT..."**

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT WAR AND CONFLICT

## STAGE 1: LISTENING AND NOTICING

- Consider the age and developmental stage of the child. Do they have any additional needs that will mean you need to adapt how you are having these conversations?
- Consider the child's previous lived experiences (previous trauma, experiences that caused the same emotions, anything that might make the child feel additionally sensitive). The impact of traumatic events on an individual depends on previous life experiences and unique psychology.
- Consider how 'close' to the event the child is (community, culture, background, family, previous experiences).
- Consider your own previous experiences and current response to the event. Are you feeling able to have these conversations with the children in your class?

## STAGE 2: CREATING SAFE SPACES AND HOLDING CONVERSATIONS

- Create safe spaces for discussions – are you starting the conversation or are you responding to something that a child has asked you?
  - Validate reactions and emotions (not minimising or denying even though it is tempting to try and protect them this way). Model and normalise feelings
  - Try to answer questions simply and factually, but remember it is okay not to know.
  - Limit exposure to graphic/distressing images and media.
  - Where children are exposed to this media, have (age-appropriate) discussions about how to be critical about what is being seen. Fact-check the information they are seeing and try to focus the discussion on the feelings that have been evoked.
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## **NEXT STEPS:**

- Support children to engage in activities that help them identify, express, and regulate their feelings safely.
- Signpost to other resources
- Focus on the positives and project stories of hope, help, and compassion.
- Encourage students/the school to participate in positive action.
- Debrief with an adult you trust (at school or at home).

# RESOURCES AND SIGNPOSTING

## *Within This Document:*

**Reflective Questions** - to explore independently or with other adults working with the child.

**Emotion Coaching** - supporting children to recognise, accept, and communicate how they are feeling.

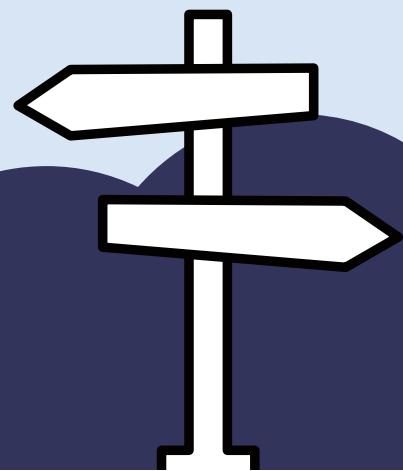
<https://solutionsnotsides.co.uk/learning-resources>

[Worrying about war \(A4 Document\) \(phoenixgrouphq.com\)](#)

[6 tips for explaining war to children | Penn GSE \(upenn.edu\)](#)

[Talking to children and young people about war and conflict | Place2Be](#)

[Child Bereavement UK](#)



# REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

## *What is reflective practice?*

- Reflective practice involves taking time and making space to think either independently or with your colleagues about your practice.
- It should be a curious and non-judgemental process.
- Research tells us that reflective practice can help us to process experiences, understand ourselves, our colleagues and the systems we work in, and help us feel prepared to manage future situations.

## *Reflective questions:*

### **How does our school respond to secondary trauma in students and staff?**

- Do our policies enable us to respond to children and adults in an attachment-informed, relationship-focused way?
- Are our systems flexible enough that we feel able to differentiate how we respond to events, based on the needs of the individual?
- Do we have clear guidelines for teachers and staff members having conversations with children about war and conflict?
- Do staff understand how to seek support in relation to these conversations?
- Are there safe spaces for staff to ask questions and debrief about these conversations?
- What do we know about our school community that might help inform what support we need to make available (or signpost to)?



# EMOTION COACHING

## Five Steps of Emotion Coaching

Dr. John Gottman

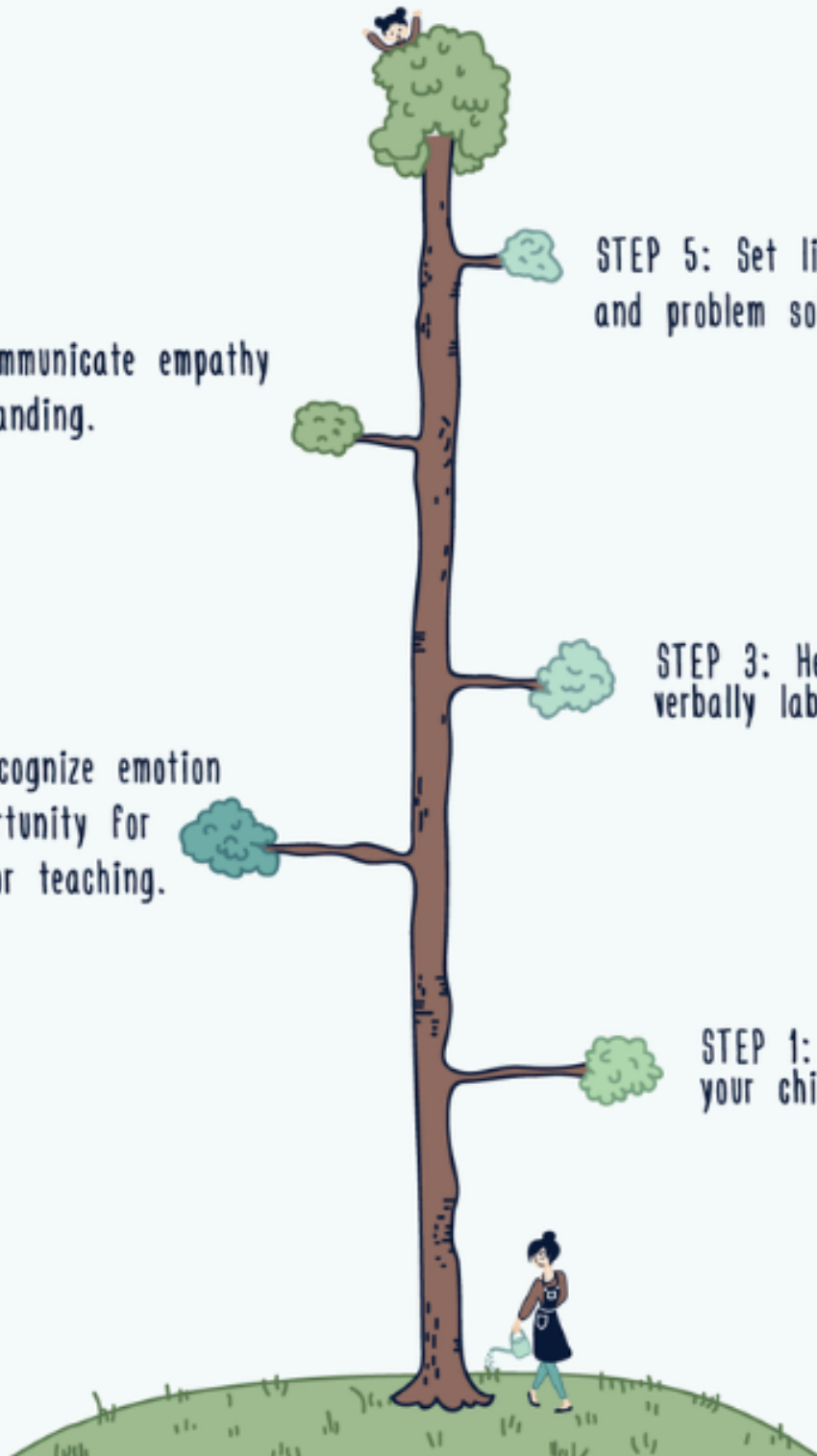
STEP 4: Communicate empathy and understanding.

STEP 2: Recognize emotion as an opportunity for connection or teaching.

STEP 5: Set limits and problem solve.

STEP 3: Help your child verbally label emotions.

STEP 1: Be aware of your child's emotions.



The Gottman Institute