

Young People's Exposure to War and Conflict in Media

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Media coverage of war, conflict and other traumatic events

In recognising the ongoing violence and suffering occurring in various regions across the world, it is important that adults remain aware and vigilant of the media that children and young people are exposed to related to these events.

Media from conflict areas can also be used to fuel cultural and faith-based discrimination and abuse in Australia, which greatly impacts children and young people in the community.

Social and traditional media are useful tools enabling children and young people to connect to each other and their communities, but it is important to recognise the potential risks. Media often covers the most frightening and graphic aspects of war, conflicts and other traumatic events. Graphic images, audio and video recordings of these events circulate widely online. With such widespread access to social media and other digital platforms, it can be hard to predict where and when children and young people may access such material, making it even more important that their screentime and access to devices are monitored and discussed.

For many children and young people from refugee backgrounds, family members may continue to be living in dangerous situations or conflict locations. It is stressful and possibly overwhelming to hear news of family members in danger.

Parents and children may struggle with the strong emotions of wanting to protect family they are separated from, while being extremely limited in their ability to do this. Some parents may become very preoccupied with the danger their family members are experiencing and not realise how much media their children are being exposed to.



www.qpastt.org.au

QPASTT provides culturally responsive services to promote the health and wellbeing of people in Australia who have sought safety from persecution, torture and war related trauma.

This resource has been prepared for teachers and community members who are caring for, or working with, children and young people who are survivors of refugee trauma, including intergenerational trauma.

For capacity building and educators' training on working with students from refugee backgrounds, contact the QPASTT training team on 07 3391 6677.

To refer someone into our programs, visit our website or call the QPASTT Support Line on 07 3391 6677.

Impacts of media coverage

Younger children (under 8 years of age) are particularly at risk of experiencing difficulties making sense of traumatic images, sounds and information in the media. Developmentally, they will struggle to distinguish place and time, or understand that repeated media coverage is not multiple events. They may become worried about their safety and for the safety of their family (in Australia and overseas). Media exposure may trigger traumatic memories from experiences prior to their arrival in Australia.

For older children (8-12 years) it is important to recognise that they may not be mature enough for the repetitive and often graphic coverage of ongoing conflicts. For all children, witnessing mass violence and seeing adults and other children harmed or in distress can be extremely frightening.

Teens and young adults are likely to absorb the news independently, often through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Monitoring screentime can be difficult so continuing to check in without blame or judgement is important. Older youths are more likely to be aware of the impact of the conflict in their own communities, which may impact their emotional wellbeing.

For teachers and school staff it is important to remember that even if students are not accessing the media at school, they may still discuss what they have seen at home in the classroom and playground.



Trauma responses in children and young people

For all children and young people, it can be helpful to recognise signs of an acute stress response including:

- Uncertainty, worry and nervousness
- An inability to concentrate
- Difficulties managing emotions, including anger, sadness and fear
- Low mood, reduced motivation and reduced enjoyment of activities
- A need to keep busy
- Difficulty with sleep including nightmares
- Fear of being separated from parents or caregivers (particularly children)
- Feeling powerless or hopeless

For all people, but particularly children and young people, being exposed to media coverage of war and conflicts may trigger memories, nightmares and flashbacks of previous traumatic experiences. It is also important to recognise that flashbacks are more than a memory. A flashback is a visceral recall of past experiences to the point that it feels like the trauma is occurring again. This can cause extreme fear, making it very difficult to convince the person they are not at acute risk of harm.

What can you do to help?

Schools and communities can play an important role in supporting individuals who are impacted by ongoing and emergent situations. If children or young people are exhibiting signs of distress, check on their wellbeing and offer options for support.

This may be:

- Allowing them to spend time in a quiet space (inside or outside the classroom)
- Speaking with a trusted adult
- Connecting them to the school's wellbeing staff
- Offering calming activities



To engage with students and parents, teachers and school staff may need to access language support. Queensland state school staff can [find a translator or interpreter](#) or engage a qualified interpreter through the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) using the Department of Education's client code **C142885** or phoning 131 450.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT WAR AND CONFLICT



Find out what they already know and how they feel about it

It is important to find out what a child or young person already knows before you begin discussing war, conflict and other traumatic events. This ensures you do not share information they are not ready for. This may include checking in on how their family and community is affected. Depending on a young person's age and level of distress, it may be more appropriate to check with parents and carers directly.



Keep it calm and age-appropriate

Use age-appropriate language, watch their reactions, and be sensitive to any fear, worries or anxiety.



Normalise emotions

It can be extremely reassuring and calming for an adult to convey to a child or young person that their emotional reaction has been noticed, is important and a normal response to conflict or frightening events. Keeping yourself calm and listening with kindness can help someone feel better.



Spread compassion, not stigma

Try to avoid judgement and instead encourage compassion. Unfortunately, discrimination can be common during times of conflict and children and young people from refugee backgrounds may be exposed to higher amounts of racial or religious commentary, discrimination or bullying.



Focus on the helpers

It is important to remind children that people are helping each other with acts of courage and kindness. This sense of people taking positive action can provide great comfort.



Close conversations with care

It is important not to leave children and young people in a state of distress. Always remind them that you care and you are there to listen whenever they need support.



Continue to check in

Given the ongoing nature of conflict, it is good to check in with children and young people. Be prepared to speak with them if they raise the subject.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT WAR AND CONFLICT - CONTINUED



Limit the flood of news

Children's development can affect their ability to process the information they are receiving. Wherever possible, try to reduce their consumption by switching off screens or limiting how much you talk about the situation.

As families may be directly affected, media might serve an important purpose. Focus on discussing how family members can continue to remain informed while considering their timing, location and modes of media consumption to reduce exposure for children and young people. It can be as simple as using headphones if they are listening to information.



Redirect away from media

Engage children in activities that provide respite from the media. This might be playing a game, going for a walk or anything that you know is soothing or grounding for them.



Take care of yourself

As trusted adults, you may find that children and young people reach out to you for assistance. It is important that you remain aware of what is occurring so that you are in the best position to provide support. In doing so, you should remember to take care of your own wellbeing and know your limits – if it becomes too much, ask for help.

Stay informed. Try to be prepared for questions that might arise. Be willing to acknowledge situations are often complex and you might not fully understand what is happening and why. In doing so, be mindful of how much media you consume yourself.



Be prepared. Get to know your community and the children and young people you are working with. This can help with knowing when conflicts might affect some community members more than others, and who you can reach out to for support.

Follow up. Discussing traumatic situations can be difficult for everyone. If you notice yourself becoming anxious or upset, it might be helpful to debrief with a colleague or seek support for yourself. Children and young people will pick up on your response to the news. It is important that you take care of yourself so you are able to support others.

Useful Links

[Explaining the news to our kids - Common Sense Media](#)

[How to talk to children about conflict and war - Unicef](#)