

Talking to Children in Times of Turmoil

Evidence-based guidance for caregivers, educators, and clinician

Children are often more aware than we realize during times of turmoil or crisis. Research in child development and trauma psychology shows that how adults talk with children—not just what they say—strongly shapes children's sense of safety, emotional regulation, and resilience. Below are five evidence-based tips, with guidance by age.

1. Start With Safety and Regulation Before Information

Why it matters: Children take emotional cues from adults. Calm, regulated caregivers help children feel safe, even when the world feels uncertain.

- Ages 2–5: Focus on physical and emotional safety. Keep routines. Use simple reassurance.
“You’re safe right now. I’m here with you.”
- Ages 6–10: Pair reassurance with predictability. “Grown-ups are working to help, and we’re taking care of our family.”
- Ages 11–18: Be honest about uncertainty while modeling coping. “This is upsetting, and it’s okay to feel unsettled. We’ll keep talking.”

*Share authentically—but avoid burdening children with the task of comforting or regulating you.

2. Match Explanations to Developmental Thinking

Why it matters: Young children engage in magical thinking and may believe events happen because of their thoughts or actions.

- Ages 2–5: Use concrete, here-and-now language.
- Ages 6–10: Ask what they think is happening before informing or correcting. “What have you heard? Let’s see if that’s accurate.”
- Ages 11–18: Help separate facts from fear-based interpretations. “Different sources explain this differently. Let’s sort through it together.”

3. Follow the Child’s Questions and Readiness Cues, Limiting Overexposure

Why it matters: Repeated exposure to violent images and news increases anxiety and trauma symptoms, even when events are far away.

- Ages 2–5: Avoid news exposure entirely.
- Ages 6–10: Pre-screen media and consider watch or reading certain news items together; pause and explain.
- Ages 11–18: Encourage media boundaries and reflection. “How does following this affect your mood?”

*Children may interpret what they see and hear very differently than adults—always check meaning before adding more information.

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4. Validate Feelings and Recognize Children's Capacity for Empathy

Why it matters: Children have a deeper capacity for empathy and compassion than we often expect. Listening to and acknowledging their feelings is important.

- Ages 2–5: Name emotions simply. “That looks scary.”
- Ages 6–10: Normalize concern for others. “It makes sense to feel sad for people who are hurting.”
- Ages 11–18: Invite reflection on values and meaning. “What feels hardest for you about this?”

5. Offer Age-Appropriate Choice and Ways to Care

Why it matters: Having choice reduces helplessness and supports emotional resilience.

- Ages 2–5: Symbolic acts of care. Drawing pictures, saying kind thoughts.
- Ages 6–10: Simple helping actions. Writing cards, learning how helpers are responding.
- Ages 11–18: Values-driven engagement without pressure. “If you want to learn more or help in some way, I can support you.”

*Helping should feel empowering—not like a responsibility to solve adult problems.

A Final Guiding Principles

Be honest. Be calm. Be brief. Be available.

Children do not need perfect explanations. They need regulated adults, developmentally matched truth, and permission to feel deeply without carrying adult burdens. Finally, find your own supportive network. You will be able to offer steadiness to your child or teen when you yourself feel grounded and supported.



For further resources
and support go to
drmarywilde.com

