



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

The War in Ukraine: Talking With Kids

Jeanne Blake: Paula, we know stress and trauma are cumulative. The war in Ukraine comes on the heels of two years of COVID-related stress. When an event as significant as what's happening in Ukraine, children of all ages read cues that something's going on. Even younger children detect increased anxiety and family members. So, let's start with guidance about how we can help children manage any worries and concerns they may have around the current global crisis.

Dr. Paula K. Rauch: For the very youngest kids, they tune into the emotion around them and personalize everything. If they overhear something about a world event, like the tragedy in the Ukraine, they won't know it's not happening in their household or in their neighborhood. One place parents of young children can put their attention is on their own mood. And notice when they are stressed. This is true about all the layered challenges that are being faced at this moment. And then look to the play of young children for clues. Is there a three-year-old that says I don't like airplanes? Ask, "Why do you not like airplanes?" Perhaps that child saw something on TV that involves bombing. So, look for changes in a young child's play, and monitor your own mood.

Jeanne: To underscore that, calming yourself before initiating that kind of conversation, because children of all ages are incredibly perceptive.

Dr. Rauch: I would encourage each of you to think about when you're in that calmest place to give messages to your child. For me, there's a place in my body where I feel that I'm calm and curious. And I'm not pressured with my own agenda. That's the place that I'm looking for. That increases the likelihood a child will share with us.

Jeanne: What about elementary aged children?

Dr. Rauch: Once kids start going to elementary school, they're getting information from all over the place. So, the rule of thumb is to always start with: What have you heard? What are kids talking about? And in that context, parents may also hear about children in a child's orbit who have a more personal connection to the crisis or challenge. In this case, to Ukraine, or to Russia. It may be important to have a conversation with the child to bring your family values to the table to understand what is confusing. If I had a marquee over my head, it would say, confusion is the enemy of coping. I'm always looking for the times when parents can have those meaningful conversations with their children to make sense of what a child has heard and is understanding.

Jeanne: And what about teens?

Dr. Rauch: They have abstract thinking. I'm always curious for a teenager to tell me what's front and center for them. What are they most worried about? I don't like to assume the thing that seems like the biggest challenge right now is necessarily what is the issue for a teenager. I don't want them to feel ashamed about what they are most worried about. I also am always sensitive to the idea that teenagers are getting their information, not just from the people they're in contact with, but also from the internet in all different forms. Just to remind parents: it's not just information your teenager may or may not have – it's talking about it together and trying to make emotional sense of it. (I.E., the war in Ukraine) Who are the people doing this? How are people helping? For me, the antidote to helplessness is being helpful. And at different ages, certainly for elementary school and for teenagers, if there's something as a family you can do that's helpful for what the child is most worried about – that's powerful.

Jeanne: You mean finding a way to help children feel that they're making a difference.

Dr. Rauch: Absolutely. And depending on the child's age, it might be making a difference for somebody having a different kind of challenge. Maybe it's bringing homemade cookies to the older single lady down the street. Or bringing a meal to a family where a parent is in treatment for cancer. Being helpful across the board, even being helpful in your own home helps kids feel they can make a difference. Helplessness puts us at risk of trauma.

Jeanne: Kindness helps build resilience. You've written a wonderful guide *Parenting Through Community Crises and Disaster*. It's found under each video on this site – under Additional Resources. It's brilliant. One section is how to monitor the media with children.

Dr. Rauch: There are three aspects. One is now that kids can get information from technology, we, as the adults in kids' lives don't always know what questions they're asking. And we don't want to relinquish that job to Siri and Alexa. We want to be answering questions. So, remind kids that hard questions deserve good answers and that we should be talking about them together. It is important to turn the media off. This is self-care for adults. Watching the same thing repeatedly is bad for our physiology and not accomplishing anything. So, check in with yourself and check in particularly with your teenager and say: How is this helping? How do you feel afterwards? And, helping each other to limit the amount of input. And try to find out what your child is seeing and encouraging them to share it with you. I just want to remind folks to listen more than you talk. That's creating that safe environment in which a child of almost any age can talk out loud, because they will come to some of their own ideas. And then you can tweak things with them or bring your wisdom to the table. But a lot of communication is about listening.

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity

Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

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