

Talking to Children About
WAR AND CONFLICT

GUIDANCE FOR
PARENTS AND
CARERS



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

When war or conflict is in the news, it can cause feelings such as fear, sadness and anxiety for children, young people, and adults. It is not possible to protect children from frightening and confusing world events, such as war and conflict. We can, however, make sure that they are getting accurate and contextual information.

This brief guidance has been developed to support parents, carers, and family members, when talking to children about the distressing events related to the conflict in Palestine and Israel.

Secondary Trauma



Viewing or witnessing traumatic events online is becoming increasingly common in the age of social media. Research tells us that witnessing these events online can have serious effects on both mental, and physical health.

Secondary trauma (also known as vicarious trauma) is the reaction to witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event happening to another person. It can be triggered by watching, reading about, listening to, or any other indirect experience of a potentially traumatising situation.

As with the effects of experiencing trauma directly, secondary trauma responses can follow a similar pattern. People might feel worried, more sensitive, or vulnerable due to what they have witnessed. Emotional responses may also occur, such as sadness, anger, and fearfulness about what has happened. These emotions can feel overwhelming and may impact day-to-day activities. Physical reactions or responses may also be present, and this is where the body might have reactions in response to the feelings of anxiety. People may have trouble sleeping, concentrating, or may feel tense. Research tells us that physical ailments, such as headaches or stomach issues may also happen. The symptoms of secondary trauma range from mild, such as uneasiness, to severe, such as those of PTSD.

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT WAR AND CONFLICT

- **Check in with yourself** - Take some time to think about your emotional state and your views on the conflict. Parents and carers are important role models for children in terms of how they process emotions. Children often look to their parents or carers for emotional cues and to get a sense of how worrying the situation is for them. They also rely on their parents or carers to establish a sense of safety.
- **Keep the child's age and stage of development in mind** - Where you can, try not to ignore or divert questions, but tailor your responses to the child's age and what feels appropriate and comfortable to you. Every child is different, and their age doesn't mean they will all understand information in the same way. You know your child best and what makes sense to them.
- **Start by finding out what they know and how they feel** - Starting with 'fact checking' can be helpful (more information about this on page 3!) and then try to use active listening (repeating back key things they've said) and wondering aloud ("I wonder if...?").
 - Children may ask lots of questions about what will happen next or questions that seem extreme to you such as "are we going to die?" or "is it safe?". It helps to not only reassure your child but also be curious about where their worry is coming from. If you can understand where the worry is coming from, you are more likely to be able to reassure them.
 - Some children might not know where the countries are. They might have not left their own area so when discussing the countries, they might need help to be able to locate them on a globe or a map. Use questions as an opportunity for children to contextualise where they are.
 - Children with additional support needs, including SEN or mental health need some extra support.
- **Consider limits on the news and social media** - When world events happen, lots of information is shared in the news and on social media. As adults, we need to think about the algorithm – the internet is very clever and notices what we look at and interact with. If we engage with content about a particular topic, the algorithm works by showing us more information about that topic.

- **Look for changes in behaviour** - Children can communicate anxiety/worry in many ways; they may be more irritable, quieter, or seeking close contact with you.
 - Look out for physical symptoms of worry such as stomach aches or difficulty falling asleep.
 - Young children may not talk directly about war but their fears may come out in their play.
 - War and conflict even in other countries can fuel discrimination against certain groups of people. Check that your children are not experiencing or contributing to bullying.
- **Other things to think about:**
 - Don't feel pressured to give clear and definite answers. For older children, you can use this as an opportunity to research reputable sources together.
 - It is important that children know people are helping each other such as first responders, fundraising, signing petitions, and how your local community is helping.
 - Try to assess how your child is feeling by observing their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice.
 - Continue to check in with your child.
 - Increase nurture in routines where possible.
 - Reassure children about safety measures at home/school/community and remind them about adults who keep them safe.



FACT CHECKING

Fact-checking is the process of verifying the accuracy of questioned reporting and statements. When children talk to you about things they have seen or heard, it's often helpful to do some fact-checking to explore this. You may find it helpful to ask or explore some of the following questions:

- Is the source reliable?
- How do you know it is reliable?
- Has the image/story been verified?
- What is the purpose of the article/image/story?
- Who has shared the information with you?
- Who published the information?
- When was it shared?
- What are the author's credentials?



ANSWERING QUESTIONS AND NOTICING

WHAT HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT PALESTINE AND ISRAEL?

WHERE DID YOU FIND OUT THE INFORMATION?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS INFORMATION?

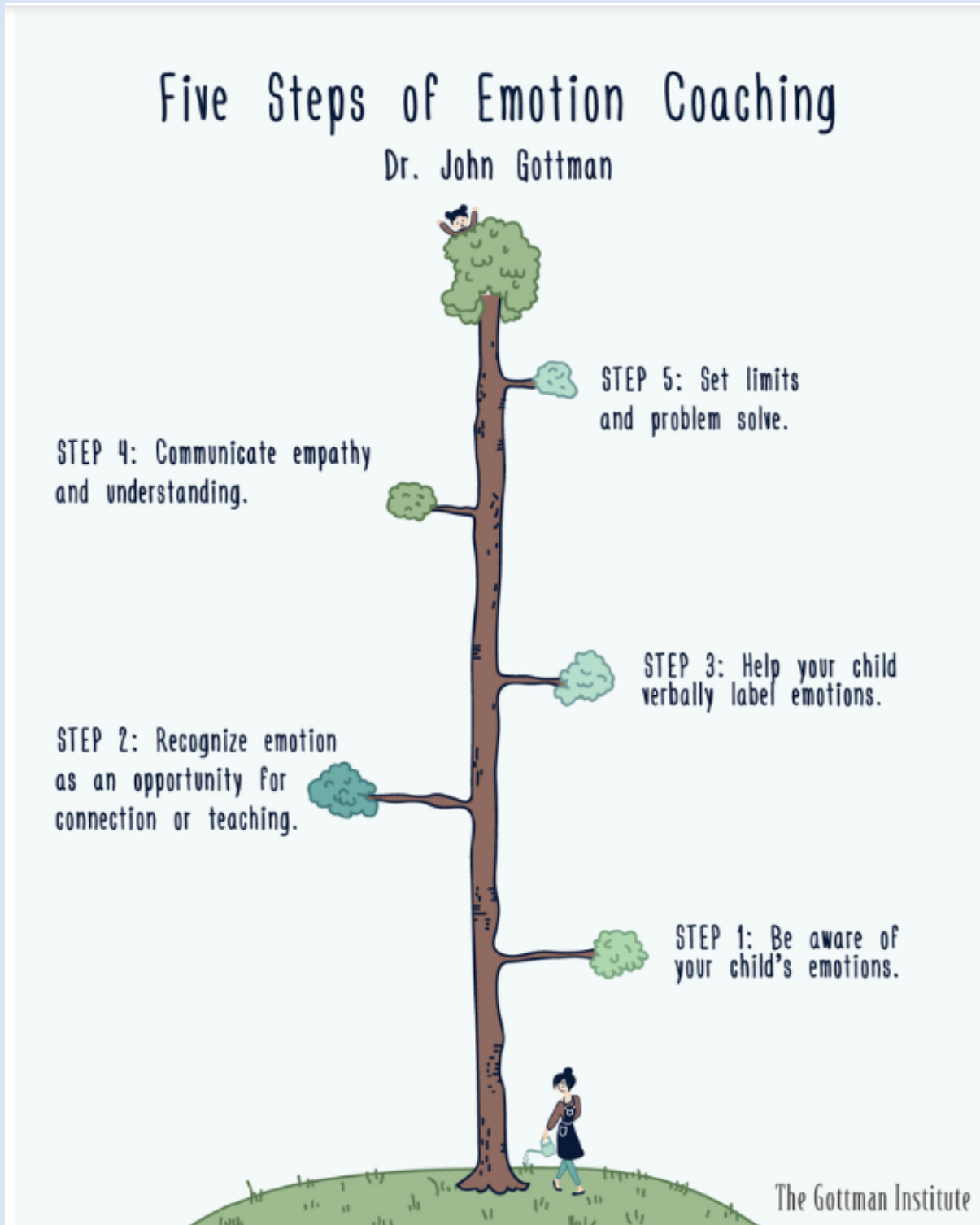
I NOTICED YOU HAVE BEEN WATCHING THE NEWS... I HEARD YOU TALKING TO A FRIEND ABOUT THE WAR, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

I DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION, SHALL WE FIND OUT TOGETHER?

WHAT IS A RELIABLE NEWS SOURCE TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION?

EMOTION COACHING

Emotion Coaching uses moments of heightened emotions and resulting behaviours to guide and teach children about more effective responses. Through empathetic engagement, the child's emotional state is verbally acknowledged and validated, which promotes a sense of security. Emotion coaching follows 5 steps, which are outlined in the image below.



RESOURCES AND SIGNPOSTING

The following websites might be helpful for you and the children you are talking to:

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

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

[Don't avoid discussing Hamas-Israel conflict with children, say experts | Children | The Guardian](#)

[How to talk to your children about conflict and war | UNICEF Parenting](#)

[Trauma & Mental Health | Guide For Parents | YoungMinds](#)

[Dealing with grief and loss | Mental health advice | YoungMinds](#)

[Child Bereavement UK](#)

[Parents Helpline | Mental Health Help for Your Child | YoungMinds](#)

[How activists and reporters can protect themselves from secondary trauma \(amnesty.org\)](#)

