



Holding Hearts in Times of Conflict: An Age-Based Guide



Infants & Toddlers

Check in with yourself: while our first job as adults is to take care of our own feelings, our emotions can sometimes spill over when the world feels overwhelming, and that is okay so long as we are keeping ourselves and the young people we care for safe. Signs that indicate adult stress may be affecting infants and toddlers include: being fussier or harder to soothe, experiencing changes in their sleeping or eating patterns, or seeming withdrawn.

Hold, hum, sway: Holding your child is inherently soothing for both child and adult. Humming soothes the nervous system, and gentle, rhythmic movement like swaying is deeply regulating. Plant your feet and root into your toes as you hold your child against your chest, hum a song they love, and gently sway. Try making this a regular routine, such as before bedtime, to structure soothing into your day.

Recognize their feelings: Infants and toddlers are unique beings who experience a full spectrum of emotion and are highly attuned to the emotional state of their caregivers. Babies can sense if their emotional needs are recognized and responded to, which is harder to do when the caregiver is distracted by their own worries or fears. Seek out extra support if needed so that you can care for your own emotional well-being as an investment in your ability to attune to and support your child throughout their emotional ups and downs.

Focus on play: Get down on your child's level and give them your full attention for just 20 minutes – set a timer if you need to. For infants, this might look like tummy time, playing peekaboo, or mirroring their sounds and movements to foster attunement. For toddlers, let them take the lead with their activity of choice, such as pretend play, dress-up, exploring outdoors, or art.

Preschool-Aged Children

Lean on routines, rules, and boundaries: Routines, rules, and boundaries provide emotional safety and containment that are vital for children to feel Secure & Calm. Predictability and stability are key for rebuilding feelings of trust and safety after a distressing exposure or event. Children need to know that their caregivers are in charge, in control, and will keep them safe. Having consistent rules and boundaries helps communicate that. Routines provide predictability, which also enhances feelings of safety.

Play with dolls: Doll play encourages children to talk about other's thoughts and emotions. Doing so can help them develop empathy in a way that differentiates self from others and motivates helping – which cultivates Compassionate & Kind. Join them in their doll play and let them take the lead – listen to what types of thoughts and feelings they are assigning their dolls, and mirror their ideas and language as you meet them in their play scenes.





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Plan for the future: When children are unsettled, the future can feel uncertain and frightening. Normalize living with uncertainty by planning things (that are within your control) that they enjoy. Weave reassuring future statements into your conversations at transition times like drop-offs and pick-ups, and involve them in making longer term plans that they can look forward to as a way to paint the future as something positive and exciting.

Talk on the move: Emotions move us, and we can also move through them. Go for a walk, kick a ball in the backyard, or plan a weekend hike to talk through things that are on your child's mind. Moving while talking about distressing thoughts or feelings can help children and adults alike move through them without getting stuck in a fear, stress, or trauma response.

School-Aged Children

Depersonalize: Children of this age, especially pre-teens, can often feel like everything is about them. They may be likely to perceive threats to themselves and their family that don't exist as a result. Try to identify differences together such as geographical location, government resources, and historical relations. Anxiety will draw their minds to the similarities that make them feel at-risk, but highlighting differences can help them zoom-out and step back from their fears.

Be their brave: Being children's brave has two components. First, acknowledge that their worries and fears are real and upsetting (rather than minimizing them in an attempt to protect them from their own feelings). Second, give them strong signs of safety. Let them know that you see their fears and you're on their side; that despite how big or scary things feel right now, you've got them and you know that everything will be alright.

Do things they enjoy: While children may feel naturally inclined to withdraw when they are stressed or scared, pulling away from the people and activities they love won't help them in the long run. Support children to stick with activities and social time that usually brings them joy - even if it's harder for them to feel it at this time. Prioritize rest, too, as feeling anxious can use up a lot of physical and emotional energy. If your child is feeling up to a challenge, encourage them to try an activity they've never done before, which may help them combat feelings of anxiety about things going on in the world that are outside of their control.

Be the helpers: While the saying "look for the helpers" is well-known, why stop there when you can *be* the helpers? Action in the face of fear is an excellent way to dial down anxiety, feel empowered, and nurture Compassionate & Kind. Find out what initiatives are running locally to support those affected by conflict or contribute to online fundraisers run through reputable humanitarian organizations and spread the word about them your online networks.

