

How to Support Children with Israel and Operation Swords of Iron

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Foster Dialogue

- Caregivers often want to protect children from upsetting information. However, **open, direct, and developmentally-appropriate** conversations are protective for kids. You want to be the person they are learning information from to help them better understand.
- **Follow their pace.** If they prefer not to talk right away, let them know you are there for them when they have any more feelings or questions (*when* can be more inviting than *if*).
- **Listen for what they are really asking.** Consider what it is that your child is really asking and see if you can respond to that question more directly. Make sure you are responding to their actual worries and not what you think they are worried about.
 - Often, children are asking about their safety and the safety of those they care about.
 - You might need to ask them directly what they are worried about right now.
 - Tell them if there is no immediate danger to them, family, or friends. You can also let them know that adults are doing many things to protect them and to protect the people they care about in Israel. You can be specific about what those things are.
 - Preschool and school-aged youth sometimes blame themselves for things that happen in the world. Let them know it's not their fault.
- **Keep it short with facts.** The amount of detail will differ based on the child's developmental age. Use short sentences and simple words. It is okay to say you don't know an answer to something.
- **Validate emotions and reactions:** Instead of telling kids not to feel sad or scared, give them permission to feel a range of emotions (sad, scared, worried, angry, confused). It is also okay if they don't feel any of those emotions too.
- **Consider developmental level.** For typically-developing children, the following age considerations are helpful, with some example language:
 - **Under age 6 years:** Preschool youth do not need to be told about negative events, but they may pick up on caregiver stress, adult conversations, information from siblings, or news reports. If you think your child is hearing about Israel, start by asking them what they have heard. Correct misconceptions. Some examples can include:
 - "A few days ago, bad guys hurt people in Israel on purpose. Now Israel is fighting a war to protect itself and make sure the bad guys can't hurt Israel again."
 - "I am feeling sad today because something very sad happened in Israel. Israel is a faraway place that our family loves. It is not your fault that I'm feeling sad."

- **School-aged youth (about 7-11 years):** Ask them what they know first to lead the conversation. Misperceptions are common and can be corrected. Limit exposure to videos, images, or direct news reports. Be honest and keep it simple. You might have the conversation while doing something else such as going on a walk or coloring.
 - “I want to talk to you about something very sad that happened in Israel recently. Have you heard anything about that?... Last weekend, a terrorist group called Hamas attacked people in Israel. Many people died and some were kidnapped. Israel is at war against Hamas. This is big news and many people are talking about it. You might see social media posts or hear more from others. How is it for you to hear this information? Are there any questions you want to ask me?”
- **Teenagers (12+ years):** Teens start to think more abstractly and are able to understand more details and context. Their ability to absorb information and ask questions may be more advanced than their emotional processing and regulation. Make sure they are not viewing the most graphic images, videos, and information. Start by asking what they know and if they have more questions. Share details broadly, which may include that there was a large terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel on Saturday. Many Israelis died and a number are currently hostages. Israel is at war against Hamas. You may choose to share that there is going to be more loss of life for both Israelis and innocent Palestinians, and that many people are grieving. They may want to learn more direct information through Israel Education organizations about what is happening or the context and background behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They may want to understand why people are making anti-Israel statements after the terrorist attack. Teens often want to focus on what they can do (ideas below). You may want to discuss social media use directly and ask what they think they can do to protect themselves when using social media given reports that Hamas may try to release disturbing images to target Israelis and Jews using social media.

Daily Life: Resilience and Coping

- **Return to routine:** Routines are extremely important for youth. Return as much as possible to predictability and schedules.
- **Parent self-care:** Kids pick up on the emotional state of caregivers. Engage in self-care, supports, and self-compassion. Limit media engagement to only a few select periods of the day to stay informed while still protecting your own emotions.
- **Coping with stress for kids:** The acronym **CARS** can provide some ideas for coping with stress:
 - **Creativity:** Making art, poetry, listening to music
 - **Activity:** Engage in physical activity, activities that bring joy, engage in activism, or other actions to support others, live Jewishly, and support Israel.
 - **Rest/Relaxation:** Prioritize sleep, take breaks when needed, take 10 deep belly breaths (breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth slowly), imagine a safe and relaxing place, or focus on 5 senses present-moment awareness (what you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell right now).
 - **Social Support:** Seek community support, engage in family activities, see friends.

- **When youth voice many frequent or distressing worries:** Help them challenge their own negative thoughts when scary situations are unlikely. Focus on what is in their control right now and what is being done to protect them, people they care about, or Israel's safety. Problem solve for stressors that can be changed or improved. Offer to schedule once daily "worry time" when youth are seeking excessive and repeated reassurance about the same topic over and over. When you don't have a good answer to a "what if" question, you can validate and repeat back their worries ("you are worried about xyz... I am too."). Redirect them to using a coping strategy (listed above) or step that instills hope (listed below).
 - **Responding to others' comments**
 - For older children and teens, you may decide that you want to be proactive in talking about how some people have a different perspective and are not supporting Israel. If youth are seeking reasons, you may share that some people are misinformed because they think that being pro-Palestinian means being pro-Hamas, Hamas has created propaganda for a long time to make people think badly about Israel, or that there is a longstanding history of antisemitism towards Jews and the Jewish state. For teens, you can share that there is sometimes truth in the hurtful things people say about Israel and can discuss nuances about how Israel has made mistakes and problematic decisions, but that does not provide any excuse for the terrorist attack that happened.
 - You can role play how your child might respond to others' comments and can say they can always talk to a trusted adult if they don't feel comfortable. Recognize that social media is often not the right forum to engage. Give them permission to not educate or respond as well. Ideas for responses may vary based on your child's pre-existing knowledge and comfort, as well as who they are talking to. One response may be, "That information is not accurate, but I don't think now is the right time or that I am the right person to talk more about it."
 - You may want to briefly discuss antisemitism further, explaining that there is a longstanding history of hate towards the Jewish people. You do not need to try to explain why antisemitism exists. Make sure your child knows that there is nothing wrong with being Jewish and there are special things about being Jewish. You can reiterate that many adults have done many things to protect Jewish people and places and that your child is safe. Even when your worries about anti-Semitic attacks may be high, remember that the likelihood of something happening is low.
- **Normative Reactions:** You may notice an increase in distress, worry, clinginess, withdrawal, irritability, or reactivity to loud noises for youth after learning about what is happening. Temporary changes are normative and should resolve within a week or two. If there is a pre-existing history of anxiety or mood-related concerns, concerns are impairing daily functioning, or if these issues do not improve, seek out additional support.

Hope, Self-Efficacy, and Pride

- Share facts that enhance hope and self-efficacy: This can include that Israel has a strong military. Many countries are voicing support for Israel. The United States has already sent aid and more is coming. The Jewish community has come together to support Israel.

- Children may already know about Jewish holidays and what they represent. Hanukkah, Passover, and Purim are holidays children may already know about that describe how the Jewish people overcame those who tried to hurt Jews. You can use those traditions to connect with our current moment. You can share that the Jewish people will get through this, that the Jewish people are strong, or that the Jewish people survive many sad events throughout history.
- Consider ways to instill Jewish traditions, community engagement, prayer, or Israeli music, food, learning, and connection in daily life. You can share that the goal of Hamas is to take away pride for Jews and to hurt Israel. By having pride in being Jewish and in Israel, children, too, can help to overcome what terrorists are trying to take away.
- Help children and adolescents identify what they can do right now that is in their control. Some ideas for what children and teens can do to instill self-efficacy include:
 - Consider ways your child can be intentionally kind to others to counteract hate.
 - Volunteer to support people in this hard time.
 - Write letters to politicians to encourage continued US support for Israel.
 - Donate or raise funds to support Israel. Learn about what Jewish organizations are doing to support Israel and where those donations are going.
 - Reach out to Israeli friends in Israel and in the United States. Create cards, letters, videos, or small items to show support and solidarity.
 - Learn more about Israel's history or the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to become informed.
 - Engage in Jewish rituals, prayer, services, and community events.
 - Continue experiencing joy, living life, and helping others.