Supporting Young People in an Uncertain World following Russia's invasion of Ukraine

The past two years have taken their toll on the wellbeing of so many people and the last thing we all needed was more uncertainty and drama, but here we are, Russia has invaded Ukraine, and none of us knows how this war will play out. Amongst children and young people anxiety levels are high, and many are feeling frightened as they grapple, perhaps for the first time, with the possibility of war in Europe, and nuclear threat.

The trouble with uncertainty is that it fuels the hypothetical, worst case scenario, "what if" thinking that feeds anxiety, and can leave us feeling hopeless and helpless. We can offer reassurance; we can remind them that every country in the world is working to prevent the escalation of the problem, but we can't give them absolute assurance that things won't get worse.

Instead, we can:

- listen carefully and show empathy which will help them feel connected, understood, and soothed
- encourage them to limit their consumption of news – doom scrolling through social media newsfeeds can contribute to feelings of anxiety
- if you have the TV on as a background to family life, please be aware that your children will be absorbing the news
- answer their questions truthfully but keep conversations brief – we don't want to ignore the subject, but we don't want to dwell on it either
- your answers need to be age appropriate for example, younger children might just need to know that countries fight from time to time. Older children will need more detail, but stick to known facts from reputable sources
- remind them that whilst we can't always choose what happens, we can choose how we respond. For example, if they get caught up in anxious thoughts, encourage them to stop, breathe and focus on what is happening right now – what can you see, hear, smell, or touch around you?
- encourage them to engage in problem solving. You might say something like, "Right now, in this moment, you are ok, but your thoughts might be telling you otherwise, so what can you do to distract yourself?
- give younger children something that reminds them of you which they can pop in their pocket and hold on to when they feel frightened. A snippet of your clothing which smells of you, a stone or shell you found together, or a photograph of a happy family moment can all help to make them feel safe if you are not around for a hug.
- for older children encourage them to find an anchor and a mantra. The anchor needs to be something they always wear such as a watch or piece of jewellery and the mantra needs to be one they chose, for example, "this feeling will pass" or "right

now I am safe". When they feel anxious, they can touch the anchor and repeat the mantra to remind themselves that this a temporary feeling.

- encourage them to use their healthy coping behaviours which are the things we do that make us feel calm. Whether it's exercising, knitting, playing music, creating dance videos on Tik Tok, cooking, or reading, they are the activities which boost production of our happy hormones, serotonin, oxytocin, and dopamine. Often when we feel distressed, we stop using our healthy coping strategies, but this is when we need them most.

- remember that you are your child's primary role model. If they see you using helpful thinking and coping strategies, they will follow your lead. If you are calm and positive you will help them stay calm and positive too. Like you, they will be feeling a wide range of emotions, and it is important that they are allowed to feel their feelings if they are to learn to manage them.

- finally, remember that whilst we are all designed to cope with significant stress, we all have a breaking point. If you feel that you, or another member of your family is not coping, please don't be afraid to seek professional help.