Our Kids' Hardest Questions

Children are doing their best to make sense of a world marked by antisemitism and war. Here are some tips for parents.

BY SIVAN ZAKAI, PH.D.

How many people in the world hate Jews?
Why do so many people have to die in war?
Is it safe to go to my synagogue?
What about my school?
What happens to children whose parents have been killed in the war?

As a mother, my heart catches every time I hear small children ask big and difficult questions like these. I grieve that my children and yours are growing up in a world with so much violence and pain. But as a social scientist who studies Jewish children's thinking, I know that when children ask questions about the darkest aspects of contemporary Jewish life, they are often asking for adult guidance. And that means that as children's most trusted adults, it's our responsibility to help them navigate living in a world that is, at once, beautiful and broken.

I've spent over a dozen years studying American Jewish children's ideas, beliefs, and questions during every Israel-Hamas war since 2012, including the one following October 7. In doing so, I've come to understand that children often know a lot more about troubling current events than adults typically think they do. Here are a few lessons I've learned from listening to children's ideas.

On Children Learning About "Bad Things"

Children pick up information in bits and pieces wherever they go. Like a big scavenger hunt, they gather clues from their environments: an overheard conversation at a grandparent's house, an argument with other children at recess, a glimpse at a sign on the highway or a poster, Google or Alexa queries, and details gleaned from school, synagogue, home, and elsewhere. As they collect information, they stitch together an ever-evolving picture of current events — including the most horrifying ones.

Children do this intellectual and emotional work whether or not they have adults willing to guide them. Therefore, adults have two options: They can let children learn on their own, or they can offer guidance as children attempt to make sense of all that is difficult and confusing about the world.

On Children and Worry

Many children, like many adults, look at events unfolding in the Middle East and antisemitism rising around the globe and feel

PHOTO BY LYNNE GRAVES

a sense of deep concern. Sometimes, out of a well-intentioned desire to protect children, adults simply reassure them that everything will be OK. But children know when everything is not OK, and they are often seeking strategies — not reassurance — when they turn to adults for guidance.

"Don't tell me not to worry," a child named Dina recently told me as she reflected on her interactions with her parents and teachers. "If you tell me everything's alright, I know you're lying. But if you tell me what to do when things aren't alright, then I start to feel a little better."

I tried to keep Dina's words in mind during a conversation earlier this year with my own elementary-school-age child.

"I'm feeling very sad and very worried," he announced, "but I don't really want to talk about it because I'm afraid then I'll make you sad and worried."

"The only thing worse than being sad and worried," I reminded him, "is feeling that way all alone. I'm here with you and I want to know about your thoughts and feelings. What do you want to share with me?"

He took a deep breath and explained, "I recently saw posters of the hostages, and there are just so many of them! Still, after all this time. And it makes me feel sad and worried."

"I feel sad and worried too," I admitted, "so we're in this together. What do we know about how to cope when we feel these feelings?"

This subtle shift — from "don't worry" to "what can we do when we feel worry?" — is essential for helping children cope with living in an uncertain world.

On Children and Problem-Solving

As children consider big, intractable problems in the world, they may respond by offering creative solutions. "Someone should build a giant countdown timer that can be seen on both sides of the Israel-Gaza border," a child told me. "And then when it reaches zero, everyone should put down their guns at the exact same time, and there will be no more fighting."

"The leaders of Israel and Hamas should be sent to the International Space Station," proposed another child. "From space, they'll be able to see that we all live on the same planet and that we have to work together to protect it and one another."

One way to interpret children's ideas is to view them as naive attempts to solve complex geopolitical problems. If adults view children's ideas in this light, we're likely to either dismiss or correct them. "Unfortunately, that would never work," we might say.

Children know when everything is not OK, and they are often seeking strategies — not reassurance — when they turn to adults for guidance.

But if we view children's ideas not as simplistic solutions but rather as articulations of a deep desire to create a better world than the one in which we currently live, then another response is possible. "I hear that you're really concerned about the ongoing fighting and want to live in a more peaceful world," we might say instead. "I don't think you or I can control who gets to board the International Space Station, and we don't decide what happens at the Israel-Gaza border, but we can definitely do things to help the situation. What is within our power to do to help people who are in danger or in mourning because of this war?"

When presented with an opportunity, most children can come up with concrete ways that they can personally contribute to the world they'd like to live in. Some children choose to bake cookies or sell their artwork to benefit organizations that reflect their values. Others believe in the transformative power of prayer or simple acts of kindness as a way of building a better world. When children offer fantastical solutions to complex problems, they're often taking the first step toward articulating more modest and within-reach ways they can personally help alleviate the suffering of others.

On Parenting in Uncertain Times

As children make sense of living in uncertain times, they have two fundamental needs: to better understand the world as it is and to be taken seriously in their desire to create a better world. As parents, our task is to help children do both. We can do this by answering children's questions about the broken world that exists and asking children questions about the more peaceful world that should exist.

Sivan Zakai, Ph.D., is the Sara S. Lee Associate Professor of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Her books include *My Second-Favorite Country: How American Jewish Children Think About Israel* and *Teaching Israel: Studies of Pedagogy from the Field*.

For more parenting resources from PJ Library, visit pjlibrary.org/blog or pjlibrary.org/israel.