

# How to talk about the war and the flood of news with children - Notes of the parents' evening model

The parents' evening on the war and the flood of news can be a whole school event or a smaller event for the parents of pupils in one class. The parents' evening materials can also be used in hobby activities and by associations, for example. The parents' evening model is based on MLL's articles and blog posts about the topic: "MLL tukee Ukrainan tilanteen käsittelyssä" - The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare.

To the leader of the MLL parents' evening model: The purpose of this parents' evening provided by MLL is to help parents talk about the thoughts and emotions caused by the war in Ukraine with their child. The aim is to also make sure that no children experience bullying or discrimination in school or other communities because of their background. If the parents' evening is organized at the school, you can ask the school social worker or the school psychologist to attend. The event may be attended by people who have a personal connection to the ongoing war; some may be Russian or Ukrainian, or they may have family, friends or relatives in the war zone. The topic can bring up emotions and cause emotionally tinged discussion. The war in Ukraine is a human catastrophe that upsets both children and adults. The images and stories on social media and in the news bring the war close. Ukrainian children also post images of their distress on TikTok, for example. Children can be exposed to horrific war images against their will, and the images can cause confusion, anxiety and fear. That is why it is important to give children time and space to talk about the war and the related flood of news in a way that is appropriate for their age and circumstances. Children have the right to obtain information and the right to feel safe. Some of the children living in Finland come from countries that are currently at war, and following the media can cause flashbacks of traumatic experiences. Some children have relatives and friends in Ukraine and in Russia. There are many children of Russian descent living in Finland who have contacted the MLL Child and Youth Helpline and chat to say that they have experienced bullying or discrimination because of the war. Some of the children have not dared to go to school. The contacts to the helpline and other services have also revealed that not all children and young people have an adult to talk with about the war news and the fears and feelings they cause. Adults now have a big responsibility to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all children. It is therefore important for parents and teachers to discuss ways to make children feel safe and believe in the future. The purpose of the parents' evening is to discuss:

- how to talk to children about the war while building their sense of safety
- how to behave so that the news and the disinformation in the media and on social media do not harm children
- how can schools and homes work together to make sure that nobody experiences bullying or discrimination because of their background.

## Organizing the parents' evening:

- The duration of the event is about 45–60 min, depending on the amount of discussion.
- In addition to parents, the teacher(s) is/are also present and take part in the discussion.
- If the event is organized as a whole school parents' evening, the principal and pupil welfare staff can be asked to attend.
- Be prepared for the fact that the discussions during the parents' evening may bring up emotions.
- Tell the participants of the parents' evening that nobody is left alone with their thoughts, but that help is always available. The MLL helpline and chat for parents is available and ready to address any concerns and questions that parents may have: [mll.fi/vanhempainpuhelin](https://mll.fi/vanhempainpuhelin).

Slide 2: Objectives of the event. First, go through the key objectives of the parents' evening: 1. to support parents as they talk about the war in Ukraine and the related flood of news with their child, and 2. to make sure that no child experiences bullying or discrimination because of their background. Tip for the leader of the MLL parents' evening model: Do some background research by reading the blog post by Tatjana Pajamäki who manages the MLL helplines and digital services. The text provides tools for addressing the acute situation and the war with children and young people in schools and at home.

“Yhdenkään lapsen ei pidä joutua häpeämään tai pelkäämään taustansa vuoksi”  
28.2.2022 Tatjana Pajamäki

The media is full of news about the war, and the public sympathy is with Ukraine, which is the target of the warfare. Social media is filled with blue and yellow colours, poems expressing solidarity to the Ukrainians, messages wishing them strength and collected donations. Russia's offensive war is a major human catastrophe in Ukraine, and Russia's actions evoke strong feelings of anger and fear. The media has interviewed Russian individuals living in Finland who say they are ashamed of what the country is doing.

*The situation in Ukraine is also a frequent topic in MLL's Child and Youth Helpline and chat. There are children who do not have any adults to talk to about the effects of the war, which feels frighteningly close, and about how they feel about it. The events have also triggered previous traumatic experiences in some young people.*



*However, the biggest concern is for the children contacting the service who speak Russian as their mother tongue or who are of Russian descent. Many of these children and young people have experienced outright racism in school and/or their other social communities. The children have described name-calling, threats and exclusion from groups. Experiencing mental violence has caused severe anxiety and fear, poor wellbeing and deep confusion and disappointment in their peers.*

*Children growing up and living in Finland face racism from other children. The war in Ukraine is now part of the daily conversation in many families. As an adult, it is important to be mindful of how you talk about the situation and how the child or young person interprets what you say. It is important that adults who are upset by the war remember to emphasize to children that the war was started by the government of Russia, not the people. Although you condemn the hostilities as an adult, no private person is responsible for them. The events between Russia and Ukraine do not give anyone the right to judge people from particular countries, and nobody should have to endure discrimination because of their background.*

*Nobody should feel ashamed because of their background either. Least of all children. Adults are responsible for setting an example in the way they talk and behave to show that all people are equal and everyone has the right to a safe life. As an adult, it is also important to make sure that your child or young person is not guilty of speaking disrespectfully or with contempt or calling someone names or discriminating against them because of their background (or any other characteristic). It is also a good idea to ask the child if they have seen or heard others being treated unfairly or bullied. Report the incident, if necessary. It is up to the adults to address discrimination against children and young people. No child is responsible for the actions of Russia in Ukraine, and no child should feel ashamed because of their background.*

The blog post can be found on the MLL website at: <https://www.mll.fi/blogi/yhdenkaan-lapsen-ei-pidajoutua-hapeamaan-tai-pelkaamaan-taustansa-vuoksi>

### **Slide 3: The war does not remain invisible to children and young people living in the digital age**

Digital platforms, devices, games, social media and the internet are a major part of life for children and young people these days. They come across and consume vast amounts of content online, including major news events, and are often the first to see and hear things. This is one of the reasons why the media literacy skills of children and young people should be developed at home and in schools. This provides skills to handle the things they come across and the knowledge of how to be safe and well-informed in digital environments without forgetting their personal and other people's wellbeing.



**Slide 4: How should you talk to children about the war? It is important for adults to try to create a sense of safety for children and young people.**

1. Give the child time and room to talk about how they feel. You can start by asking what the child thinks about the situation before you answer their questions.
2. The younger the child, the more you should protect them from all kinds of news about crises. Do not watch or talk about the news in front of the child.
3. With a school-aged child, you can talk about conflicts and the threat of war. Stick to the facts when you talk to the child, avoid being overly dramatic.
4. Stress the fact that despite the worrying things shown in the news, there are also many adults who are working to resolve the situation as we speak. Point out that it is in nobody's interests to expand conflicts and wars.
5. Help the child realize and understand that the things described in the news are not a threat to them. The child may not necessarily understand distances or the nature of crises.
6. Encourage optimism by telling them that despite the news, there are fewer wars and conflicts today and people's wellbeing has improved, and we are working to make sure that this would continue to be the case.
7. Shield the child from adult concerns. If you feel extremely worried, make sure that the child does not overhear any adult conversations about the issue. Adults should also try to follow the news less if they cause anxiety and fear in them. Sources: Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)

**Slide 7: The war is present online.**

Like many major news events, the war in Ukraine also reaches children and young people via media. It may be difficult for children and young people to avoid extremely horrific content online. Social media sites commonly used by children and young people, such as TikTok, serve as a platform for various videos portraying the war and people in distress. Sources: Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)

**Slide 8: Protection and being present for your school-aged child.**

Ask the child or young person what kind of war-related content they have come across on their devices. Listen to what the child thinks and feels about this content. Restrict the use of social media sites normally used by the child or young person if they contain upsetting content. Talk to the child about the news they have come across on social media and tell them how it can differ from other news coverage. If social media sites are full of news and events that cause anxiety and fear in the child, it may be a good idea to take a temporary break from social media.



Parents do not need to watch any upsetting content either, but it is worth being aware of and finding out what kind of content, images and videos there are on the sites that your child is on. Keep in mind that social media and news feeds are different for each user, and the algorithms show different users different things. Upsetting images or videos should not be shared with peers online or in social media groups. The same goes for various information and texts. In the middle of a crisis, it is hard to know what content is true and what is false. Disinformation, or intentionally false or biased information, tries to influence people's impressions, actions and attitudes. Social media channels are also full of people's opinions and personal experiences from the war zones and elsewhere. Make sure that there are ordinary, positive things in the young person's life. Remind each other of all the things that are good right now. Normal everyday life and things that make you feel good provide an important balance to frightening, overwhelming news and improve the ability to cope.

Sources: Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)  
Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)

### **Slide 9: Are there younger siblings in the family?**

All children should be protected from news events that may upset them. The events shown in the news can feel confusing or frightening. Children may be scared by the human distress, catastrophes, war or violence they see in the news. Individual images and sounds can frighten people of all ages, but especially small children who do not intentionally follow the news. You can also share these instructions with the participants on what to do as a parent if your child has been frightened by something in the news or other media content.

If your child has been frightened by something they saw in the media

- Calm them down and provide safety and consolation, offer to hold them.
- Ask them how they feel and listen to them.
- Explain what they saw truthfully and age-appropriately.
- Remain calm.
- Go through the incident again, if needed.

Sources: Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)  
Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)



## Slide 12: The goal of information warfare is to influence people

The following is a brief presentation of some of the key phenomena related to information warfare. Information warfare tries to influence people's opinions, behaviour, emotions, attitudes and set of values. Children and young people can also be exposed to various attempts to influence and pit different sides against each other, trying to cause damage and harm to the parties. The consequences of information warfare can be seen online and in school, for example in the form of defamation, bullying and discrimination against the different sides of the war.

**Disinformation** means false or misleading information that is produced intentionally. It is always based on a motive: often the purpose is to gain political power, money or attention or cause general confusion. The purpose is to cause harm or damage to a person, community or ideology.

**Misinformation** means false or misleading information that is produced or spread unintentionally. Any one of us can spread misinformation unknowingly.

**Fake news** means intentionally produced information that is partially or completely false. The intention is to spread it widely. Fake news imitates the news or other journalistic text types. Fake news tries to influence people's opinions or behaviour. The underlying motives can be, for instance, economic or political. Fake news is not always an actual news article or text, but it can also be a video, for example. Images and videos taken out of context can be used as "proof".

**Visual influence:** Deepfake and other video and photo manipulations, memes, fake profiles etc. Deepfake refers to a video created using artificial intelligence software that looks like a video recorded in a real situation. People on deepfake videos appear to say or do things that they have not said or done in reality.

**Propaganda** is often produced by those in power, businesses or other organizations. It portrays a one-sided picture of phenomena with the aim of influencing people's values, emotions and opinions.

Sources: Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)

"Tunnista disinformaation strategiat" learning material, Project Caverna / Finnish Society on Media Education 2021

[https://mediakasvatus.fi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/12/ProjectCaverna\\_Tunnistadisinformaationstrategiat\\_Materia\\_alipaketti.pdf](https://mediakasvatus.fi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/12/ProjectCaverna_Tunnistadisinformaationstrategiat_Materia_alipaketti.pdf) • "Pelkkää feikkiä?" material, National Audiovisual Institute 2018 [http://www.mediataitokoulu.fi/pelkkaafeikkia\\_web.pdf](http://www.mediataitokoulu.fi/pelkkaafeikkia_web.pdf)





### Slide 13: Foster media literacy

News these days have also shifted to social media where news stories are read through the images, videos and links shared by friends. Each media user interprets what they see and hear based on their personal opinions, attitudes and prejudices. In the fast-paced world of social media, few look into the original sources of the news or assess the reliability of websites. When a piece of news is shared by your good friend or a social media celebrity you admire, your judgment of the situation and media criticism may become clouded. As it is, people typically spend time with like-minded people on social media. As a result, specific viewpoints may become stronger, regardless of whether they are true or not. Go through e.g. the following key points related to media literacy with the participants:

- Fact or opinion? Where did you see the news? For what purpose was the information shared? A lot of content is shared on social media, but not all of it is necessarily based on facts. News and social media streams are also filled with opinions, fake profiles and influencing through information.
- Does the source of the news or information seem reliable? Has the writer written the text using their own name? Are they a real person? Can the source of the news or information be found?
- Try to identify one-sided and distorted news and news based on biased values. Has the person who created or shared the news wanted to provide only a single perspective? Has the person who created or shared the news left out something relevant? What kind of power is exercised in the news?
- What is the angle and purpose of the news? Does the news try to influence the way you think? Remember that proper news is based on statements from reliable authorities and experts and verified information and it reflects on topics from multiple sides. A good news story presents multiple angles in a neutral way and reflects on the topic from several perspectives.
- Talk to the child and young person about the kind of news that can be trusted in a crisis. In Finland, the news of traditional media (such as Yle, MTV, HS, STT) are governed by the ethical Guidelines for Journalists, which support reliable communication.

Sources: Treenaa lähdekritiikkiä - YouthNet Kriittisesti netissä - YouthNet Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)



## Slide 14: Fake news and hate speech challenge media literacy

Does the source of the news or information seem reliable? Has the writer written the text using their own name? Are they a real person? Can the source of the news or information be found? What is the angle and purpose of the news? Does the news try to influence the way you think? Remember that proper news relies on research and statements from reliable authorities and experts. A good news story presents multiple angles in a neutral way and reflects on the topic from multiple sides. Study the images, videos and infographics. Learn to spot photo manipulations. Images can be edited, cropped a certain way or removed from the original context so that their original meaning is changed. It is often hard to distinguish between true content and content taken out of context or manipulations, such as deepfake videos. It is always good to practice caution online. Identify hate speech that discriminates against others. The purpose of these types of news is to turn people's opinion against a particular topic, person or group. Do not pass on hearsay or questionable information. Learn to spot fake news sites that are used to spread questionable information.

Sources: Vihapuhetta ja vastapuhetta - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Treenaa lähdekritiikkiä - YouthNet Kriittisesti netissä - YouthNet Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)

## Slide 15: Talk about your child's media environment

Parents may be left in the dark when it comes to what their child or young person is doing or finding online. When it comes to big, serious news or news about things that otherwise affect the life of children and young people, you should talk about the issue at home and ask the child what the situation looks like on the child's social media. Among others, the social media site TikTok, commonly used by children and young people, is full of videos from the war.

Sources: Kriittisesti netissä - YouthNet Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Kriittisyys uutisia lukiessa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)



## Slide 17: Bullying caused by the war must be addressed

Bullying is a group phenomenon. It typically develops in a group and is based on the relationships between group members. School bullying refers to a situation where a pupil is the target of constant bullying. There may be one or more bullies. Bullying can consist of shoving, hitting, name calling and making fun of someone, excluding them from the group, mean comments – anything that tries to hurt or insult the other person. Bullying often means excluding the bullied from the social interaction of the class or group or from their common social media platforms. In addition to pupils who are bullied, there are numerous pupils in schools who are either bullies themselves or bystanders to bullying or afraid that they will be bullied. Simply the fear of being bullied can take a toll on the pupils' school enjoyment. Systematic, long-term bullying poses a severe developmental risk to a child. A feeling of togetherness with peers is necessary for children. Friendships in school are particularly meaningful to the overall wellbeing of children. The war in Ukraine has had a negative effect on bullying in schools. There are many children of Russian descent living in Finland who have contacted the MLL Child and Youth Helpline and chat to say that they have experienced bullying or discrimination because of the war. Bullying can involve insults, name calling, shoving or leaving someone all alone. Some of the children have not dared to go to school. Adults now have a big responsibility to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all children. It is therefore important for parents and teachers to discuss ways to make children feel safe. Schools and homes should work together to ensure that nobody experiences bullying or discrimination because of their background.

### How to talk about bullying as a parent

- Tell your child that bullying is always wrong.
- Try to put yourself in the bullied person's shoes to imagine how bad, lonely and sad they feel. This will help your child develop empathy.
- Ask your child how they have behaved or what they would do if they noticed someone being bullied. Would they join in and start making fun of the person or would they withdraw from the situation to avoid being picked on by the bullies? Tell the child that it is brave to defend a child who faces discrimination from others. Defending someone is a lot harder than joining in and making fun of them. Other children will also respect someone who boldly interferes with bullying, even if they may not be brave enough to do so themselves. Tell the child that they should always tell an adult about bullying, such as a teacher or a parent.
- Ask the child if they have witnessed bullying or discrimination online, on social media or in messaging groups.



If you notice something unusual about your child's behaviour, ask them about it and encourage them to talk about their experiences. Do not judge, but try to listen. You should also understand that the child may not want to tell you about bullying straight away, but they may deny it at first. They may be embarrassed. They may think that there is something wrong with them. They may be afraid of disappointing their mother or father. They may not want to make their parent feel worried. They may sense that the parent would not be able to handle hearing about their negative experiences or hurt feelings.

- If your child tells you they have been bullied, take it seriously. Calmly listen and hold them close to you. Do not get agitated by what you hear – at least not in front of your child. Ask your child what has happened. How did it start? Who was involved in the bullying? What did they say or do? What did you do? How did you feel? Did anyone help you? Was the teacher told about it? Tell them that the bullying will have to stop right now and that you will help them. Make it clear that bullying is wrong. Sources: Kiusaaminen – mitä vanhemmat voivat tehdä? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Nettikiusaaminen - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Kiusaaminen – YouthNet

#### **Slide 18: Setting an example as an adult matters**

Stress the fact that it is the government that is always responsible for starting a war, not the people. Both the Ukrainians and the Russians are suffering because of the war. Talk about the fact that there are children and young people of Russian descent living in Finland as well and they should be treated just as respectfully and kindly as everyone else. Nobody should face discrimination or bullying because of their background. Children and their parents are not responsible for the war. • If your child or young person tells you they have witnessed bullying or discrimination against people of Russian descent, talk to them about it and ask them if the incident has been addressed.

- Encourage your child to be a fair friend to everyone.
- Do not transfer any negative attitudes or feelings you may have to your child, but deal with them with other adults when the child is not present. Remember that adults set an example for children, and as adults we need to model considerate behaviour towards others.

Sources: Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Yhdenkään lapsen ei pidä joutua häpeämään tai pelkäämään taustansa vuoksi - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi)



## **Slide 20: If you are concerned about a child or young person**

Children and young people are unique; some can empathize strongly with the distress of the children in Ukraine and be worried about them. Some may fear that the war will also spread to Finland. Some children and young people have come to Finland from countries at war, and the situation in Ukraine may bring back memories of traumatic experiences. You should seek professional help if the child's behaviour changes dramatically: they cannot sleep, have nightmares, frequently wake up in the night or start wetting the bed, are restless or do not have the energy to play. When it comes to young people, there is reason to be concerned if they obsessively follow the news, seem anxious or depressed, do not have the energy to do homework or cannot concentrate on them, withdraw from their friends' company or express hopelessness towards their future. Children and young people may also suffer from physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach pains.

Sources: Yhdenkään lapsen ei pitä joutua häpeämään tai pelkäämään taustansa vuoksi - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Onnettomuus uutisista puhuminen lapsen kanssa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Väkivaltauutisista puhuminen lapsen kanssa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Turvassa, vaikka pelottaa – YouthNet

## **Slide 21: Encourage optimism and belief in the future**

Take care of yourself so that you have the energy to be present and create hope for your child. Identify your personal feelings related to the war and accept them. Limit your media use and how actively you follow the news and social media and look after your mental wellbeing. Remember that everything is well in Finland at the moment. Attend to your basic needs and those of your child: enough sleep, nutrition and exercise. Exercise reduces both mental and physical stress. Joy is also needed. Children and families have the right to enjoy doing things, even if things are not fine for everyone in the world. You can also consider ways to help those in Ukraine or coming to Finland with your children. Doing good things and helping others will also make you feel better.

Sources: Yhdenkään lapsen ei pitä joutua häpeämään tai pelkäämään taustansa vuoksi - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Miten puhua lapselle sodasta? - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Onnettomuus uutisista puhuminen lapsen kanssa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Väkivaltauutisista puhuminen lapsen kanssa - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Median aiheuttamat pelot lapselle - Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (mll.fi) Turvassa, vaikka pelottaa - YouthNet

# Information and support

**Discussion support (finnish)**

[MLL:n Vanhempainpuhelin](#)

p. 0800 92277

**Also chat and webletter service**

**MLL Vanhempainnetti (finnish)**

[www.mll.fi/vanhempainnetti](http://www.mll.fi/vanhempainnetti)

**MLL Mediaeducation**

<https://www.mll.fi/en/about-mll/media-education>