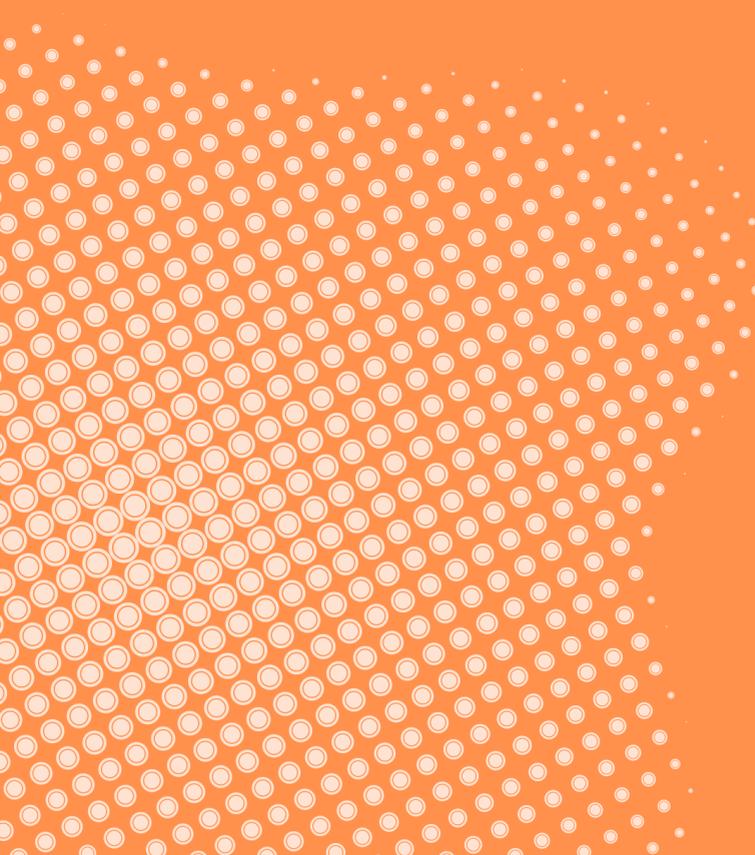




When Geopolitics enters the Playground

Guiding children through conversations around global conflict

written by Abby Paathak



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Our Current Reality

As headlines about India-Pakistan tensions flood our screens, I find myself reflecting on how this decades-long conflict has become the backdrop to so many aspects of our lives.

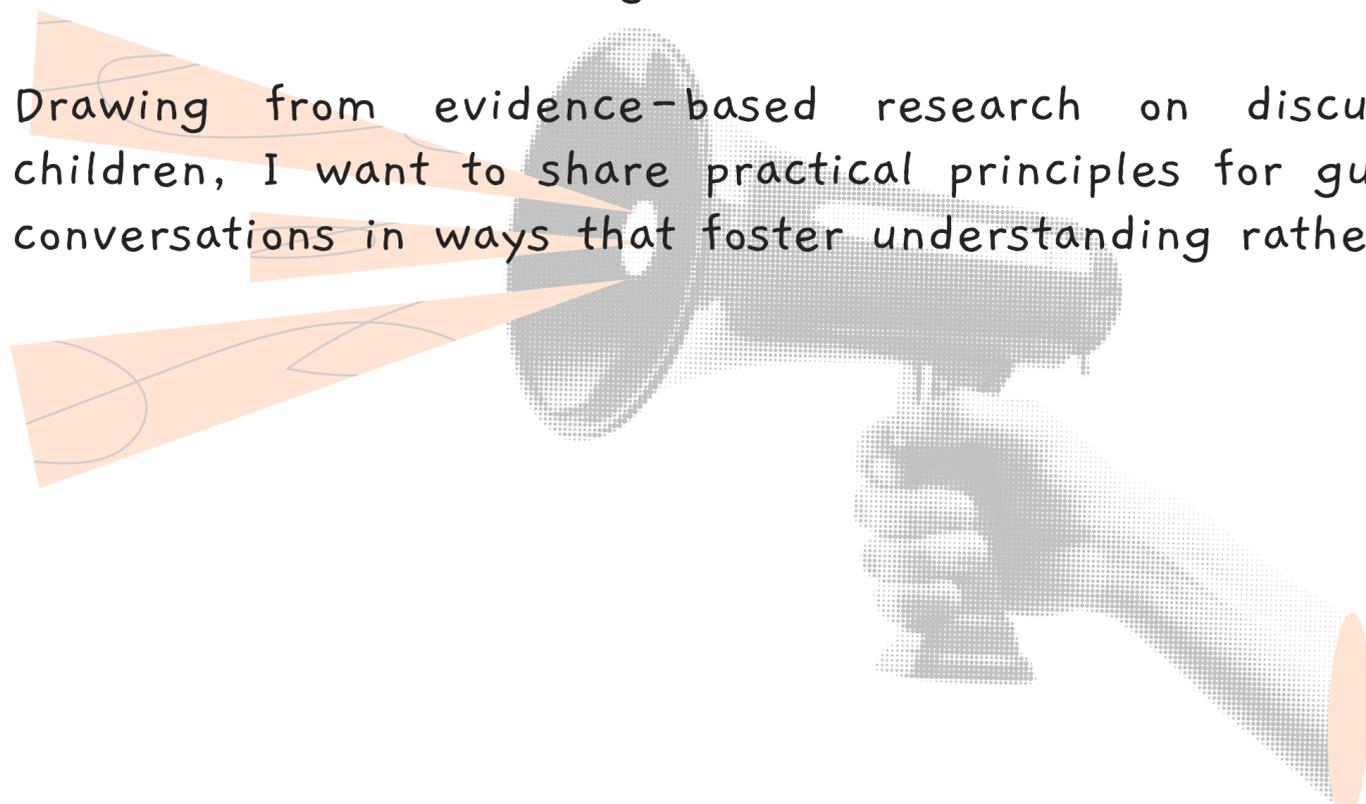
What strikes me most is the impact on the invisible audience absorbing these discussions—our children. They hear snippets on TV news, catch fragments of adult conversations, scroll past inflammatory social media posts, and piece together narratives that often lack crucial context. The complexity of historical grievances, territorial disputes, and religious dimensions are reduced to oversimplified narratives that can plant seeds of division in young minds.

I recently overheard a 6-year-old ask, "Why can't they just be friends?" — a question that cuts through diplomatic complexities with the clarity only children possess. Yet without thoughtful guidance, these same children risk adopting polarized viewpoints that perpetuate cycles of misunderstanding.

The Missing Piece: Developmentally Appropriate, Balanced Conversations

What's often missing is intentional dialogue with children that acknowledges the conflict while providing age-appropriate context and multiple perspectives. When adults avoid these conversations or respond with oversimplified biases, we leave children vulnerable to forming conclusions based on fragmented information.

Drawing from evidence-based research on discussing conflict with children, I want to share practical principles for guiding these difficult conversations in ways that foster understanding rather than division.



5 Principles for Discussing Global Conflict

1. Tailor Information to Developmental Stage

Children's comprehension of conflict varies dramatically by age. Young children have limited understanding of geographic distance and may fear that distant conflicts pose immediate threats to their safety. School-aged children begin developing more nuanced perspectives but may still struggle with abstract concepts related to international relations. Adolescents typically demonstrate greater political awareness and may form autonomous viewpoints on complex global issues

In Practice:

- For preschoolers (3-6): Use simple language like "Two countries are having a big disagreement about important things." Emphasize physical distance: "This is happening far away from us, and we are safe."
- For school-age children (7-12): Introduce basic geography with maps showing both countries. "India and Pakistan were once one, and later separated in 1947. Sometimes they disagree about borders."
- For teenagers (13-18): Engage with historical context and ethical complexities: "The partition created deep wounds that continue to affect relations. Different groups have different perspectives."

2. Listen Before Speaking

Even more important than explaining or providing information about war is to listen to what the child spontaneously wants to comment on or ask about. Children's questions reveal their specific concerns and misconceptions.

In Practice:

- Create a judgment-free zone: "I noticed the news was talking about India and Pakistan. What have you heard about what's happening?"
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues: "You seem worried when you hear about the conflict. Would you like to talk about it?"
- Use drawing or play with younger children to express feelings they can't verbalize.

3. Validate Emotions While Providing Reassurance

Children need to know their feelings—whether fear, confusion, or curiosity—are legitimate responses to conflict news.

In Practice:

- Acknowledge feelings: "It's normal to feel upset when countries argue or fight. Many adults feel that way too."
- Provide realistic reassurance: "Leaders from both countries are talking to try to solve problems. Many ordinary people want peace."
- For children with family connections to either country: "It's okay to have strong feelings about this. We can care deeply about people and places while still trying to understand all sides."

4. Counteract Stereotypes with Humanizing Stories

When conflicts become "us versus them" narratives, children risk developing harmful stereotypes about entire religious or cultural groups.

In Practice:

- Highlight cultural similarities: "Both countries love cricket, have similar foods like biryani, and celebrate colorful festivals."
- For older children, introduce them to music, art, or literature from both countries that emphasizes shared humanity.

5. Empower Through Critical Thinking and Constructive Action

Children often feel helpless when confronted with large-scale conflicts. Helping children identify concrete actions... transforms passive anxiety into constructive engagement.

In Practice:

- Develop media literacy: "When we see news about India and Pakistan, let's ask: Who is telling this story? What might be missing?"
- Encourage learning: Visit cultural events, read books by authors from both countries, or learn about peace initiatives.

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The Do's and Don'ts: A Practical Guide

DO:

- Create regular dialogue opportunities. When tensions spike, ask, "Have you heard anything about India and Pakistan at school today?" This opens space for ongoing conversation.
- Acknowledge complexity. "This conflict is like a tangled knot that took many years to form. It can't be untied quickly or easily."
- Mind your language. Replace "they always" or "they never" with specific references to "some leaders" or "certain groups."
- Share personal connections mindfully. "Many people from both countries want the same things—safety for their families and peace."
- Address religion thoughtfully. "People of different faiths—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians—live in both countries and many work together for peace."

DON'T:

- Don't demonize entire populations. Avoid statements like "Pakistanis think..." or "Indians always..."
- Don't oversimplify religious dimensions. The conflict isn't religious—it involves complex historical, territorial, and political factors.
- Don't let media do all the teaching. News clips and social media posts often emphasize the most dramatic or divisive aspects of the conflict.
- Don't shut down questions. Even difficult questions deserve thoughtful responses rather than "You're too young to understand."
- Don't impose your biases. Children deserve multiple perspectives to form their own informed views.

Answering Difficult Questions with Factual Authenticity

When discussing the India-Pakistan conflict, children often pose challenging questions that can catch adults off-guard: "Are Pakistanis our enemies?" "Will there be a nuclear war?" These moments represent critical crossroads where our responses can either foster understanding or reinforce prejudice.

Research shows that children benefit most from answers grounded in factual authenticity rather than emotional bias. Children may ask, "Why do we have to go to war?" "Why do people kill other people?" Sometimes we don't know all the answers and that is okay". This intellectual humility models honest engagement rather than defensive posturing.

For questions about why the conflict exists, provide age-appropriate historical context without vilifying either side. When children ask about danger, offer realistic reassurance: "The leaders of both countries know that war would harm everyone, which is why they usually find ways to communicate before they take harsh steps." For questions about suffering, focus on resilience and humanitarian responses rather than graphic details.

What matters most is maintaining a delicate balance—addressing children's concerns truthfully while filtering information through a developmentally appropriate lens. Like skilled translators, we must convert complex geopolitical realities into language children can comprehend without distorting the essential truths.

As educational psychologist Charlotte Graver notes, literature can be "the perfect vehicle" for introducing sensitive topics to children. Books like "A Train to Pakistan" by Khushwant Singh (for teens) or "Same Same But Different" by Jenny Sue KostECKI-Shaw (for younger children) can open meaningful conversations.

In times when tensions cast long shadows across regions, our most important work may be guiding the next generation to approach this complex relationship with nuance, empathy, and hope. Like gardeners tending delicate saplings, we must nurture understanding while uprooting prejudice before it takes hold.



What approaches have you found helpful when discussing this conflict with the children in your life? I'd love to hear your experiences!

Get in touch :).

