

Talking with Your Children About Highly Stressful Events

The recent election has led to a wide range of reactions. Some people feel that their voices and wishes have been heard, while others are experiencing worries, anxiety, fear, and anger. How can we best help our children if they are feeling stressed by what they are experiencing?

Explain in an age-appropriate manner: Hopefully parents/guardians will be the first to talk with children about current events that may affect your child. Explain in simple, clear terms what is going on, using words and concepts he or she is likely to understand.

Listen to your children: Ask what they have heard about the situation. What do they understand about the outcome of the election? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions at an age-appropriate level. Do not assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be during an activity, such as drawing, mealtime, or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. For example, a child may see an event on television and assume it happened in their neighborhood, rather than many miles away. Also, it is not uncommon for young children to repeat what they saw or heard over and over again to help them process what happened. Be truthful but do not tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of current events, be clear that you will always do your best to keep them safe. Let them know adults are working hard to make sure they will stay safe.

Pay attention to your own reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety in response to current events, your children will be more easily reassured. It is okay to let children know that you are upset/concerned/angry too – but be sure to show them how you can remain calm even if you are upset, and let them know what is helping you feel safe.

Monitor access to media: It will help if young children do not watch (or overhear) news reports or see the front page of the newspaper if there are examples of violence occurring. Young children who see a stressful event on the news may think the event is ongoing or happening again. Older children and adolescents can engage in conversations with you about your reactions to what you see in the news. For adolescents, focus on positive, solution-oriented internet sites and messages. Ask your older children what they are seeing/hearing on social media such as Facebook.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior that they are struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, sleep problems, wanting to sleep in your bed, or bed wetting. They may feel guilty that they were somehow to blame for what happened, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible.

Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities like mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc., reduces anxiety and helps children feel more in control by allowing them to know what to expect. If you have familial or cultural routines that your child finds comforting (i.e., visits with extended family or religious services or customs) be sure to use these.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and do not assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

A teachable moment: This is a good time to impart your family values. Help children understand that our country and democracy are strong and have gone through changes for hundreds of years. Take kind and compassionate action in your community. Highly stressful events make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activities we engage in help us feel in control and less vulnerable. We can show our children that while some of us may feel vulnerable, we are not helpless – there are ways for the family's and community's voices to be heard. If you are worried about how your child is reacting, speak with a school counselor, mental health professional, faith leader, or community leader.