Supporting Students in Politically Charged Times: Tips for Families and Educators

Major political events, such as elections, court decisions, or legislative acts, frequently generate strong reactions, emotions, and disagreements among many Americans. Parents, caregivers, and educators have a critical responsibility to help children and youth feel safe and secure and to help them learn how to engage with others with differing perspectives in a peaceful and respectful manner.

When these events occur, children and youth may experience a wide range of emotions. Some may feel anxious, angry, afraid, or unsafe, while others may feel hopeful and excited. It is important to acknowledge these diverse feelings and provide a supportive environment where all students can express themselves and feel secure. Below are some recommendations for how parents, caregivers, and educators can support children and youth in politically charged times.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND EDUCATORS

Model and Teach Desired Behaviors

Caregivers and educators influence children and youth through their actions and attitudes.

- Help children manage their reactions to events by modeling healthy coping strategies, articulating viewpoints productively, and monitoring emotional states.
- Acknowledging and redirecting negative thoughts supports both children's social–emotional skills and adults' positive states of mind.
- Limit exposure to media coverage and any outlets that perpetuate charged rhetoric.
- Be attentive to your own conversations that are heard by children and youth to ensure they are respectful.

Reassure Children

Many children and youth are aware of the intensity of political events, and some may feel at risk. This can include those whose preferred candidate or stance on an issue did not win and those who feel targeted or marginalized.

- Reinforce strategies for physical and psychological safety.
- Encourage children and youth to support each other during difficult times.
- Ensure that children and youth know how to report concerns to adults.
- Reinforce that adults will respond to their concerns.

Help Children Manage Strong Emotions

Major political events can activate strong emotions in children and youth, from anger to stress to excitement and hope.

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- Help children understand and acknowledge the range of emotions that they are feeling and learn to express them in healthy and respectful ways.
- Support stressed children by spending time with them, encouraging them to talk, maintaining routines, and providing coping strategies.
- Know the signs of significant distress (e.g., changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns) and steps for seeking help, such as contacting a school mental health professional.
- Acknowledge that some children may be unaffected, and avoid assumptions that all students require this support.

Stop Harassment or Bullying Immediately

Personal attacks of any kind, including those that are politically motivated, are harmful and contribute to a divisive climate.

- Reinforce acceptance and appreciation for diversity. Systemically minoritized and marginalized individuals may feel especially at risk.
- Acknowledge that everyone is entitled to their personal opinions, but hateful or prejudiced comments about others' cultures, sexual orientations, religions, or races will not be tolerated.
- Talk to the children involved about the reasons for their behavior. Make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable.
- Offer alternative methods of expressing anger, confusion, or insecurity, and provide support to those who are subject to the bullying.
- Emphasize the expectation of respect for all individuals, and demonstrate that harassment of any kind will not be tolerated.

Promote Respectful Dialogue in the Democratic Process

Sharing different points of view and finding common ground, shared goals, and mutual understanding strengthens our society. The very nature of civil disagreement is to acknowledge respectfully the views and experiences of other people and learn from differing perspectives.

- Reflect on your own experiences and how these shape your interactions and reactions. Help children to do the same and ask questions of each other, rather than level accusations.
- Teach children and youth that words matter and use phrases like, "I believe" or "Have you thought about" instead of making statements that place value judgement on another individual's perspectives.
- Emphasize the importance of engaging in the democratic process at all levels of government.
- Highlight the positive contributions American citizens make by volunteering, voting, and collaborating with community members from different backgrounds.
- Focus on common goals such as safety and well-being, equity, a strong economy, and coexistence.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Educators play a critical role in creating a positive school climate for all students. It is imperative that educators facilitate respectful discussions among students and safeguard the well-being of those who may feel at risk. The democratic process and one's ability to participate in it are a cornerstone of our country. Educators have an opportunity to help teach the social–emotional skills that will help students become a positive part of our process. In addition to the above strategies, educators can take the following actions.

Reinforce a Sense of Positive School Community

- Establish positive relationships between adults and students to create safe, successful learning

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environments. Such relationships are built on a sense of mutual trust and respect, even amid differing opinions or viewpoints.
- Maintain culturally and linguistically responsive practices and ensure that students and their families feel connected and engaged.

Reinforce Staff Well-Being

- Provide staff with clear guidelines on how to lead discussions, and recognize and respond to students' needs.
- Enable staff self-care measures and make clear that staff interactions and behavior must be respectful.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Educator Exhaustion and Burnout: Building a Supportive Staff Care Culture
- Supporting Marginalized Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Caregivers
- Supporting Mental Wellness: Tips for Caregivers
- Supporting Mental Wellness: Tips for Educators

Please cite this document as:
National Association of School Psychologists. (2024). *Supporting students in politically charged times: Tips for families and educators* [handout].

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