

Talking to Children about the Violence in DC: Tips for Parents & Teachers

By David Fassler, MD

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
CHILD & ADOLESCENT
PSYCHIATRY

W W W . A A C A P . O R G

Once again, parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of explaining disturbing national events to children. Although these are understandably difficult conversations, they are also extremely important. Keep in mind, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to have these discussions. However, here are some suggestions that might be helpful.

1. Create an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions. At the same time, it's best not to force children to talk about things unless and until they're ready.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you're “making things up.” It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future.
3. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
4. Explain to children that it's fine to protest and express your opinion. But it's not OK to hurt people or destroy property.
5. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
6. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
7. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. It's fine to let children know that they are safe in their house or in their school. But you can't promise children that there won't be further violent protests or that no one will get hurt.
8. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in or near DC.
9. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems.
10. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. Children will be very interested in how you respond to national events.

11. Let children know how you're feeling. It's OK for children to know if you are upset or confused by national events. Children will usually pick it up anyway, and if they don't know the cause, they may think it's their fault. They may worry that they've done something wrong.
12. Don't let children watch too much television with violent or upsetting images.
13. Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news or images about violent protests. These children may need extra support and attention.
14. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
15. Children who are preoccupied with questions about violent protests should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional help include:
 - ongoing sleep disturbances
 - intrusive thoughts or worries
 - recurring fears about violence, leaving parents, or going to school.

If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family practitioner or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.

16. Although many parents and teachers follow the news and the daily events with close scrutiny, many kids just want to be kids. They may not want to think about elections, politics or what's happening in DC. They'd rather play ball, climb trees or go sledding.

Protests which become violent are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel confused, upset and anxious. As parents, teachers and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner.

Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they will get through these uncertain times and go on with their lives. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.

David Fassler, MD is a child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, Vermont. He is also a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine, and member of the Consumer Issues Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.