

GUIDELINES FOR HELPING YOUNGER CHILDREN DEAL WITH THE ELECTION¹

by Dr. Diane Levin, Ph.D.

- **Protect children, especially young children, as much as possible from exposure to news--on the TV, radio or from hearing other adults talk about it.** While it's rarely possible to protect them fully from the news, having safety and security predominate is still vital for healthy development so the more you can limit it the better. The more news about the election and people's distress about it that children see, the more dangerous they are likely to think that the world is and the more scary content they will need help working out.
- **Trusted adults have a vital role to play helping children sort out what they see and hear and in helping them feel safe.** When exposed to scary news and election information, children need to know you are there to help them in an ongoing way and that they won't be criticized for bringing up the issue or saying what they really think. How you react plays a big role in determining how they think and feel, and what they learn.
- **Take your lead from what the children do and what you know about them as individuals.** Base your responses on the age, prior experiences, specific needs, and unique concerns of individual children.
 - **Young children won't understand the election or what is going on as adults do.** When they see or hear about something scary, they often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. They tend to focus on one thing at a time and the most salient aspects of what they see. Because they don't have logical causal thinking, it's hard for them to figure out the logic of what happened and why, or sort out what is pretend and what is real. They relate what they hear to themselves, to what is important to them, as well as to what they already know. This can lead to misunderstandings.
 - **With age, children begin to think more about what underlies an event and possible real world implications.** They use more accurate language and make logical causal connections, but still don't understand all the meanings and can develop misunderstandings and fears. Find out the meanings behind their language and base your responses on what they seem to know and be asking.
- **Start by finding out what children know.** If a child brings up something about the election and government in conversation, you might ask, "What have you heard about that?" Or, "What did you hear?"
- **Answer questions and clear up misconceptions that worry or confuse.** You don't need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they seem to want to know. Don't worry about giving "right answers" or if children have ideas that don't agree with yours. You can calmly voice your feelings and concerns, and reassure them about their safety.
- **Support children's efforts to use play, art, and writing to work out an understanding of scary things they see and hear.** It's normal for children to do this in an ongoing way; it helps them work out ideas and feelings; it shows you what they know and worry about. Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials—blocks, airplanes, emergency vehicles, miniature people, a doctor's kit, markers and paper—help children with this. However, the election does not easily lend itself to working things out in play the way

¹ Adapted from: *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times (2nd Ed.)* by Diane Levin, Washington, DC: NAEYC & Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility, 2003.

some other scary events do. Some young children might find it helpful to conduct their own election around an issue they care about.

- **Be on the lookout for signs of stress.** Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating from parents or sleeping, or troubles with transition are all signs that additional supports are needed. Protecting children from the media images, maintaining routines, providing reassurance and extra hugs can help children regain equilibrium.
- **Help children learn alternatives to the harmful lessons they may be learning about violence and prejudice.** Talk about alternative ways to deal with the negative lessons children may be learning from the election, and words and actions of the new president. Show them how they deal with issues differently in their own lives. For example, help them look at different points of view in conflicts. Point to positive experiences with people different from themselves. Try to complicate their thinking rather than tell them how to think.
- **Discuss what adults are doing to make the situation better and what children can do to help.** Children can feel secure when they see adults working to keep the world safe. And taking meaningful action steps themselves also helps children feel more in control. Make sure they know it is the job of adults, not children, to keep them and the world safe.
- **Have regular conversations with parents and other professionals.** Work together to support each other's efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes sharing information that comes up with particular children, developing effective response strategies together, and agreeing to protect children from unnecessary exposure to violence. Talking together can also help adults meet their own personal needs in dealing with the violence that surrounds us.

RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN OF MULTIPLE AGES

Strauss Valerie. *Answer Sheet: The Frightening Effect of 'Trump Talk' on America's Schools* Washington Post, November 6, 2016.

[This Washington Post entry has a helpful article by Mica Pollack, with useful links and resources.]

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/11/06/the-frightening-effect-of-trump-talk-on-americas-schools/>

Michael, Ali. *“What Do We Tell the Children? Tell Them, First, that We Will Protect Them.* Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-should-we-tell-the-children_us_5822aa90e4b0334571e0a30b

TeachingTolerance.org. *“The Day After.”*

[A useful blog post from before the election. The web site continues to add other entries that will also be helpful.] ” <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/day-after>

Election Processing Community Circle. [Useful and clear *guidelines* on how to lead a safe and open discussion with children (not too young) about the election results.]

<https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/1t-yjKl5oRRFAvtXAFknWlmdmnsLCcumR4S2Y2nmriag/mobilebasic>