

Talking to Kids About the Attack on the Capitol

Explaining the violent attempt to stop Congress from certifying that President-elect Joe Biden won the election.



neaToday

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. Wednesday's violence at the U.S. Capitol is an attack on our country and on our democratic institutions.**
- 2. Most children are aware of more than we realize, and many educators and parents have spoken frankly to them about the racism and bigotry that they have experienced or witnessed.**

3. Continuing that discussion is critically important in this moment.

The disturbing images of an angry mob of insurrectionists storming the halls of our democracy were blasted across screens today. Our nation has never witnessed an event like this in recent history and it's difficult to make sense of the confusing, frightening scenes, let alone explain the situation to our children. But what is most important to remember and to tell kids is that the brave people who are helping will eventually bring order and peace.

We can also assure children that the majority of Americans are joining together to support justice and democracy and that the dangerous and unlawful people we saw in the nation's capital today will not be successful in hurting our country.

Most children are aware of more than we realize, and many educators and parents have spoken frankly to them about the racism and bigotry that they have experienced or witnessed, which has been fueled by the Trump administration and his supporters. Continuing that discussion is critically important in this moment.

Children of all races, religions, all gender identities, of all cultures and social classes must have a safe space to speak and ask questions. To be sure, educators and parents don't have all the answers, but we must encourage their questions and listen to their concerns.

“We must come together — just as we did in record numbers in the election — to show our students that we will stand together against politicians who incite violence and those who act on it...We will protect our democracy. The world is watching. Our students are watching.” - NEA President Becky Pringle

Explain that the attack on the Capitol today was led by Trump supporters seeking to overthrow a legitimate presidential election and the will of the American people, but they will not be successful. Our country is much stronger than they are and their efforts to divide us will only make our unity more powerful.

The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) also offers the following tips for talking to your students about racial violence and other national tragedies:

REASSURE CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE SAFE.

Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

CREATE TIME TO LISTEN AND BE AVAILABLE TO TALK.

Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children, in particular, may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

KEEP YOUR EXPLANATIONS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE.

- Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. If they're afraid about their safety in school buildings, give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

- Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done to keep them safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools and communities.
- Upper middle school and high school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

REVIEW SCHOOL SAFETY PROCEDURES.

This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

OBSERVE CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL STATE.

Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional right away if you are at all concerned.

LIMIT MEDIA EXPOSURE.

Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Monitor what kids are viewing online and how they are consuming information about the event through social media. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

MAINTAIN A NORMAL ROUTINE.

Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

A lot of these tips can also be applied to educators — to take proper care of their students, [they must first take care of themselves.](#)