
Friday Focus
from the Center for Autism and Early Childhood
Mental Health

Focus on:
**Talking to Young Children about Violence in the
News**

On this first week of the new year, our Center is reviving the Friday Focus to share our sadness and dismay at the violence at the Capitol this week. We condemn the actions of domestic terrorists. We uphold civil actions of peaceful protest that have allowed our democracy to continually advance on the long arc journey to justice. We stand together against violence with conviction, understanding, discourse, and resolve to work for justice and for peace.

We understand that our children are watching. Many adults may wonder whether they should shield or protect children from the violent events of this week. In developmentally appropriate ways, we encourage adults to educate children on our political system in general, and of the attempted insurrection of January 6th in particular. We believe democracy

survives because of awareness, peaceful critique, and civic action.

We also know that being exposed to violence can be scary for children. We have included guidance below to assist you through a conversation with children about the violence at the Capitol.

Let us be clear-eyed and honest with our children about our collective societal failures and political faults, especially the continual restriction to the freedom guaranteed by our Constitution for so many. But let us also be hopeful that the foundation of positive relationships and healthy development that our work supports will provide the base on which we build the democracy that reflects our highest ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.

Ten Tips for Talking with Children about the Violence at the Capitol

1. If you feel uncertain about how to start this conversation with children, practice with adults first. Notice the parts of the conversation where you might need assistance and ask for support from other adults.
2. Ask children what they know and what they have heard. Listen to the child's story and follow the child's lead. Use simple language and correct any misunderstood accounts. Tell a child what they need to know, not all that you know.
3. Be there and be calm. Monitor your own emotion and tone of voice. Pay attention to your gestures, affect, and voice because children pay special attention to these ways of communicating. Children scan the faces, voices and

movements of others to discern safety. Your presence, voice, words, soft and loving touches, provide each child with the best ways of feeling safe.

4. Share your feelings. It is okay and important for children to know that the adults in their lives have the same feelings when bad things happen. Ask about their feelings. Often children will experience and express their feelings through their body states. Ask them "what" and "where" they feel (e.g. head, tummy, chest, neck, etc.) as well as "how" do they feel.

5. Recognize that there are some feelings that we can only share and cannot fix: Children need us to be there with and for them at such times. It's appropriate to both not have an answer and be with the children in their sadness and confusion.

6. While we encourage telling children about the events of January 6th, monitor repeated exposure to images and reports of the events. Provide enough exposure to inform, but not frighten.

7. If children do get scared, remember the 3R's of security: Relationships, Routines and Restoration. Highlight relationships with familiar and consistent caregivers, family and friends. Protect and increase routines that are familiar and normalizing.

8. Provide structure and communicate safety: Uncertainty is the province of adulthood. While we as adults may feel unsure of the state of our democracy, we must always let children know that we will take care of them and protect them.

9. A sense of mastery can help alleviate fear and uncertainty. Encourage your children to get involved in a community or service program such as collecting items for a food bank, making a call to their Congressperson, signing a petition or writing a letter to someone in local government about something that they would like to help change in their community.

10. Remember to take care of yourself: We have all been living with the collective stress of Covid-19 and political uncertainty for a long time. Yet, we know that if the adults in a child's life are overwhelmed, overstressed and overtired, it will be more difficult for the child to feel safe, secure and stable. Prioritize the cultivation of the "ABC's" of self-care: awareness, balance and connection, in your own life.

(Costa, G. & Mulcahy, K, 2021)

SPOTLIGHT ON STORIES!

We know that stories can help communicate difficult topics to children. We love this list of books about elections, politics and civic engagement from the Helping Kids Rise organization. See if you have any in your library!

[Books about Elections, Politics and Civic Engagement](#)

We are all in this together!

If you have any resources that you would like to share, please email us at caecmh@montclair.edu

We are here to help!

If you are feeling alone, worried, concerned, or unsafe, or you know someone who is feeling these ways, please also reach out to caecmh@montclair.edu.