

PARENTS CAN HELP CHILDREN WHO ARE UPSET OR WORRIED

ABOUT RESULTS OF THE ELECTION

Not surprisingly, many parents feel upset, anxious and helpless when talking to their children about their reactions to the election. Thoughts and questions like these cross parents' minds:

- I don't know what to say. I'm too upset to talk about it.
- What can I say that can help at all?
- How will this affect my children?
- Should I just wait for my children to bring it up?
- What if they ask me questions I can't answer?

Yet, at a time like this parents can help their children in ways no one else can.

WHAT HELPS CHILDREN NOW?

TALKING THROUGH YOUR OWN FEELINGS FIRST: Your child's feelings may be different or similar to yours-- Talking over your own feelings first with another adult first can help you. Afterwards, you will be calmer, better able to listen and give help specific to what your child's worries and feelings are. If your children want to talk with you before you are calm enough, tell them you will listen as soon as your feelings are clear, so you can give them your complete attention.

BRINGING IT UP: When parents bring up the topic first, they make it easier for children to talk about a troubling event. It is important for children to see that their thoughts and feelings are not so big and scary that no one—not even their parents—can talk about them. Starting with something like “When kids get big news they did not expect—like who the president will be—it usually helps to talk about it.” Then you can ask if they want to talk about what they think or feel. If they say No, do not push them to talk—just say you are ready to listen when they want to talk.

FINDING OUT WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW: Ask them what teachers and kids at school or in the neighborhood are saying. Then listen carefully without interrupting or judging. It is often easier for children to start by talking about what others think and say.

LISTENING HELPS A LOT: Just listening to them helps children feel calmer, cope with shock and think more clearly. The results of the election affect everyone, but the impact is different for each child and often their feelings will change from day to day: for example, disbelief to anger to fear to hope to sadness to calm to “I don't care!”. Listening lets children know that their feelings, whatever they are, deserve attention, respect and understanding. Encouraging them to express their feelings in words, drawings, rap, stories, poems or diaries can reduce distress and help you understand what they need.

STARTING WITH THE KNOWN AND CLARIFYING THE FACTS: It is usually easier if parents start with what they know their child has seen, heard or already mentioned. Words like this can help: “You said that you keep thinking about what might happen now. Yes, the election is over now, but we do not have a new president until after ____ (give a date, number of weeks, after the New Year, etc.). Even when we have a new president, we still have the same laws unless Congress changes them. Changes in government take lots of time. If your child is afraid about something that is not true or not possible, say so.

BEING HONEST: It is important for parents not to lie or evade real questions children ask. Answering their questions clearly and simply calms them. There are many questions parents do not know the answers to—questions like these:

- Why did Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton say or do _____?
- Why did people vote or not vote for _____?
- Why don't people get along? Why don't they agree?
- How can people be like this?
- Why do people get so mean and call mean names?

When you are not sure what to say, it is okay to say “That is a tough and important question---I do not know --- I wish I understood all this better myself. I will think about it first and then I will tell you”. Being honest about what you do not know or understand shows children that they do not have to know all the answers now.

GOING AT A CHILD'S PACE: Going at their own pace in talking about feelings steadies children—they each have their own pace. He or she may say or ask one or two things and then change the subject to something lighter--or go out and play-- only to come back to talk more later—even days later.

MAKING SENSE AND NORMALIZING FEELINGS: Children can feel upset by their own feelings—or those of their friends or brothers and sisters. Confusion, anger, fear and sadness are all common reactions. Hearing parents say that their feelings are normal can help children accept and express them---something like: “Your feelings are normal and make sense, even though they are tough feelings. Chris's feelings are different from yours, but his/hers make sense too because he/she thinks about

it a different way. There are lots of ways to think and feel about this that make sense. “ Words of acceptance like these help children feel calmer, more normal, able to live with inner turmoil and questions.

FOCUSING ON THE PRESENT NOT FEARS ABOUT THE FUTURE: Shocking news can cause people to worry that other things they count on might suddenly change. Explain to the child that for now, nothing is different: school, their home, their family, their clothes, their toys, their favorite things to do, etc. Listing each thing that will be the same for the near future usually calms children. Keep family and school routines as consistent as possible---this provides a sense of security when children may not know what to expect next. Explain that the United States changes presidents every four or eight years and that even if a new president changes some things, nobody knows exactly what will change and when, so it is not a good idea to be upset about things that are not happening now or soon.

REPEATING: Asking the same questions and hearing the same answers helps many children, especially younger children. This soothes children in the same way as hearing a frightening story many times—each time, it’s a little less scary because they know what will come next.

AVOIDING ABSOLUTE REASSURANCES: No one can be sure of what will come from this election or that certain things will not happen. Broad, sweeping reassurances like “Everything will be all right.” can lead children to distrust adults.

TEACHING THEM TO CALM AND DISTRACT THEMSELVES FROM WORRY: Uncertain times like these are a good time to teach children how to calm themselves with deep breathing, followed by thinking about and doing things that hold their interest: favorite books, exercise, music, games, toys, sports.

CHOOSING SOMETHING POSITIVE TO DO WITH THEIR FEELINGS: Taking constructive action helps all of us with feelings of powerlessness and fear. Once the shock begins to lessen, helping your child decide what to do about their specific concerns at home or at school or in the neighborhood will help them.

ASSURING THEM: Tell them they can talk with you about this anytime and that you will do all you can to help them stay calm and be safe.