

NASP Guidance for Reinforcing Safe, Supportive and Positive School Environments for All Students

Bethesda, MD: The 2016 election has been long and fraught with strong emotions. As a nation, we have much to do to heal the divisiveness that has resulted. As parents, caregivers, and educators, we have a critical responsibility to help children and youth feel safe and secure and learn how to engage with others of differing viewpoints in a peaceful, tolerant, and respectful manner.

As always, schools play a critical role in this process by creating a positive learning environment for *all* students. It is imperative that educators facilitate respectful discussions among students and safeguard the well-being of those who may feel at risk. Below are recommendations for how adults can support children and youth in the days and months ahead.

Reinforce a sense of positive school community. Establishing positive relationships between adults and students is foundational to safe, successful learning environments. Such relationships are built on a sense of mutual trust and respect. Maintain culturally and linguistically responsive practices and ensure that students and their families feel connected and engaged. We function as a nation *only* when we have that shared sense of relationship; helping children identify and develop those relationships is vital.

Model and teach desired behaviors. We know that adult actions and attitudes influence children. Adults can help children and youth manage their reactions to events in the news and their communities by understanding their feelings, modeling healthy coping strategies, and closely monitoring their own emotional states and that of those in their care. Identifying and redirecting negative thoughts and feelings can help to teach children social-emotional skills and problem solving.

Reassure children that they are and will be okay. Many children and youth are aware of the intensity of this election, and some may feel at risk. It is important to reinforce strategies to ensure both physical and psychological safety. Remind adults and students of the importance of supporting each other during difficult times and acknowledge people will have a variety of emotions. If students feel physically or psychologically unsafe, they need to know how to report incidences, and trust that adults will be there to validate and respond to their concerns.

Help children manage strong emotions. For many children, the intense discussions, media images, and messages that they were exposed to during the election can trigger a range of strong emotions. Some children may experience anger or stress. Others may feel a sense of excitement and hope. Children's emotions often spill over into schools. Help children understand the range of emotions that they are feeling and to learn to express them in appropriate and respectful ways. For children experiencing stress, we can help by spending time with them, encouraging them to talk about their feelings, maintaining a sense of normalcy in their schedules and activities, and providing coping strategies.

Reinforce acceptance and appreciation for diversity as critical American values. Acknowledge that everyone is entitled to their personal opinions but that hateful or intolerant comments about others' cultures, sexual orientations, religions, or races—or any other comments that are meant to hurt or make another feel threatened, unsafe, or unwelcome—will not be tolerated.

Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately. Make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable. Talk to the children involved about the reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity, and provide supports for those who are subject to bullying. School staff can encourage students to continue to be respectful of others.

Help children see other perspectives and value respectful dialogue. Sharing our different points of view and working to find common ground, shared goals, and mutual understanding is the best way to draw strength from our diversity. The very nature of civil disagreement is to acknowledge respectfully the views and experiences of other people and learn from differing perspectives. Adults can start by reflecting on their own experiences and how these shape their interactions and reactions. They can help children to do the same and ask questions of each other, rather than hurl accusations. Adults can create safe spaces for youth to share their feelings and concerns while also exploring how they might feel and act if they were in someone else's shoes. Help students see how words matter, as does how we use them. Teach them to avoid stigmatizing statements and to state their thoughts with opening phrases like, "I believe" or "Have you thought about" instead of "Anybody who" or "No one should."

Discuss the importance of respecting our democratic process. Despite the divisive nature of the election, Americans voted all across the country in a peaceful and respectful manner. Our system of government is based on the same peaceful and orderly transfer of power in January. Millions of Americans exercised their right to vote and the system is responding accordingly. This is the underpinning of democracy. Highlight how important it is that all citizens engage in the democratic process, not just during a presidential election, but all of the time and at all levels of government. Discourage students from seeing the election in terms of winners and losers but rather the need to focus on common goals such as creating a strong economy for everyone and finding a path to move forward as one country.

Encourage children to channel their views and feelings into positive action. We are all part of the American community and can make positive contributions. Like adults, children and youth are empowered by the ability to do the right thing and help others. Working with classmates or members of the community who come from different backgrounds not only enables children to feel that they are making a positive contribution, it also reinforces their sense of commonality with diverse people.

For additional information and resources to help support children and youth, visit www.nasponline.org.