

Having Difficult Conversations with Children about the US Election: Tips for Immigrant Parents

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Since the election, there has been a lot of fear and uncertainty. President-elect Trump has vowed to deport 2-3 million immigrants. He has said that he will target people with criminal records. At this point in time, we do not know what Mr. Trump will do once he is in office. We do know that Trump's words and vows have already impacted our communities. Since the election, there has been an increase in hate crimes towards immigrants and other groups in the U.S.

How do parents help their children understand the information they are getting from the radio, TV, the internet and their friends? How do parents help children understand hateful words they may be hearing from other people? Parents sometimes avoid talking with children about difficult events because they want to protect them. But children are learning about the election and the promises and threats that have been made from many sources. They may be getting bad or incomplete information, making them feel worse.

Below are some tips to help parents guide their children to understand what has happened and what it might mean for their family.

- 1. Consider your child's age when you talk with them.** Younger children will take what they hear more personally. When they hear "build a wall" they might think that means a wall around where they live. They need more direct, less complicated answers. Older children and teenagers may be more likely to look for the causes of events (*"How did this happen?"*) and can recognize the differences between what happened and what people say (*"People say my family is okay, but I heard Mr. Trump say that he wants to deport parents like mine"*). Older children will develop their own opinions, and they can generally handle more complicated conversations.
- 2. Find out what your child knows already.** For example, ask your child, *"Are kids at school talking about the elections? What are they saying?"* You may find that your child has misinformation, for example that there is going to be a war in the US or a wall built around the state where you live. In this case, you can correct that information.
- 3. Help your child feel safe.** Make sure your children know who the safe and supportive adults are in their community - family members, neighbors, teachers, doctors, counselors, social workers, etc. Ask your child if they feel safe at school and throughout the day. Ask them if they have heard any hurtful words. For younger children, say something like: *"We know that some people are saying and doing hateful and hurtful things to other people. We also know that there are many people who do not like those hateful words and behaviors. Your family and teachers will make sure that everyone belongs, is safe, cared for and treated fairly. If you feel unsafe or if people say things that are not nice to you, you can come to the adults. Our job is to keep you safe."*
- 4. Reassure your child that many people are working to keep them safe.** For example, many mayors and governors have said that they will not change their approach to immigration enforcement. Describe the efforts that are being made by advocates, leaders, teachers, and others to make sure that families are safe.
- 5. Tell your child that you understand how they are feeling.** If your child says that they are feeling afraid or anxious, tell them you understand why they might be feeling that way. Do not

say, “*That’s silly*” or “*You don’t really feel that.*” Be a good listener. Pay attention to the words *and* how he/she says the words.

6. **Encourage your child to ask questions.** Answer their questions. Think about your child’s age and the answers they need to hear when you respond.
7. **Model and foster pride in who you are and where you come from.** We know from lots of research that it’s very healthy and helpful for children to feel proud both of being American AND of being part of their ethnic group. For example, it is healthy for a child to be proud of and know what it means to be American AND Guatemalan, or Colombian, or Dominican, or Cape Verdean, or Mexican, etc. Remind children that having multiple cultures and multiple languages is a strength, and something to be proud of. Being proud yourself of who you are and where you come from will help your child develop this pride.
8. **Be aware of your own emotions and take care of yourself.** Find outlets to cope with your own emotions of anger, fear, and anxiety so that you can be more present for your child. Talk with friends, with a counselor, or with community leaders for support. Practice healthy strategies such as writing in a journal, taking a walk, or breathing deeply to help calm yourself.
9. **Recognize the signs that your child might need additional help.** A few signs (among others) that your child might need additional help include: *significant changes in sleep or appetite, sudden clinginess and not wanting to be separated from you, not wanting to do things he/she once enjoyed, worrying thoughts that he/she can’t stop, withdrawal from friends or family, outbursts at home or at school, complaints about headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue.* If you have concerns about how your child is doing emotionally or socially, talk with the school counselor or school social worker about your concerns.
10. **Help your child find ways to create the world they want to live in.** ACT in your community by volunteering, getting involved with a community organization, writing letters to congress people, or other actions that can help you and your child feel empowered.
11. **Above all, reassure your child.** Reassure her/him that you will do everything you can to keep her/him safe. Reassure her/him that you will be there to answer questions and listen. Reassure her/him that you love and respect them.

Helpful Resources

http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/agebyage_3.html

<http://www.antibiasleadersece.com/838-2/>

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx>