

How Teachers Can Talk to Students about Rioting at the US Capitol

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Firstly, it is important that you, the teacher, reflect on how you are feeling. Many people are very alarmed or angry about the ongoing events, and for different reasons. You should seek to engage children in this discussion at a time when you are calm and in a receptive state of mind. Children rarely exist in a bubble, and the presence of an emotionally stable adult helps children to buffer the “toxic” stresses in their lives.

The first recommendation is to proactively engage children, rather than to wait for them to ask the first question, or to display their distress in their academic or behavior. Children, especially those who are in middle school or above, will have already heard about the ongoing protests and riots. Start by asking them what they think is happening, where they get their information from, and how it makes them feel. It is more than ok to ask them how they think the protestors or bystanders feel. Some people might be wary of stepping into this discussion, but without adult input, children can easily come up with their own, often faulty, explanations. By actively engaging and also allowing children to ask questions, you become a grounding figure for them, and demonstrate that the door is always open to future conversations.

When we start discussions like this, we should use developmentally appropriate language. Younger children may benefit from brief and simple explanations, and you have to repeat the same explanation. Consistent answers and explanations are reassuring to younger children who may be worried or anxious. Older children will likely need more detailed explanations, and may want to engage in a detailed discussion about what they have heard and seen. Some children will be much more sensitive to these events than others, and this could be because of their own experiences with trauma, or the presence of mental health challenges such as anxiety. For these children, it is helpful to provide chances for discussion and reassurance, and also to keep an eye on their emotional state. In some children, these stressful situations can precipitate or exacerbate their mental health needs, requiring referral to specialized services. In these situations, parental involvement is essential.

News and social media are saturated with intense and often alarming media. Even news running in the background may raise tension and anxiety in children. It is important to limit the exposure of children to this media, and have an adult provide context to the media that they are saying. Help children to understand that only a small minority of people are engaged in these riots and protests, and that the children have a safe environment to discuss and display their feelings. It is also useful to explain that people can have different viewpoints and beliefs, and it is ok to discuss these as long as we respect one another. Being part of a protest is a first amendment right, however, it becomes unacceptable when we infringe the rights of others, especially with threatening and violent behavior. You could help them to identify that many of the protestors are angry or upset, or even scared. People can also protest for many different reasons, people can protest because they do not feel the election was fair, or they may protest because they feel people are treated unfairly because of their skin color or gender. When people are very angry or emotional, they can act in senseless ways that they later regret. Many protestors have families, jobs, and are likely to spend 99% of their time not protesting.

In addition to the above, some children may need help to find the right words to identify their feelings. Other children may need help to create a list of activities that they can use to help them to destress. Finally, children often don't have historical context to help to guide their feelings and thoughts. While these are particularly challenging times, history shows us that the vast majority of these situations are time-limited and resolvable when people (eventually) work together.