

FAMILY

How to talk to your kids about the chaos at the Capitol

The events at the U.S. Capitol caused fear and confusion. Here's how to help children make sense of it all.

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As the news of a mob of violent protesters storming the U.S. Capitol played out on Wednesday—on top of what's already been a scary and overwhelming year—it's normal for children to have fears and questions. And it's normal for parents to be unsure about how to respond.

After all, finding a balance between helping kids understand the world and not causing too much anxiety can be difficult, says Gail Heyman, a professor of psychology at the University of California San Diego.

"Parents are often tempted to lie as a first response, because they don't want their child to worry or that they shouldn't be burdened with this, and that's a bad approach," she says. "It's bad to overwhelm children with too much information, but you can tell them the truth in simple ways and use their questions to guide you on how much to share."

Even though you might be tempted to try to keep the news from your kids, or to even lie about what's happening—don't. According to Cassidy O'Brien, a family therapist at San Diego Kids First, confronting kids' worries head on, explaining what's happening in a truthful but simple way, and emphasizing that kids are safe are the best ways to help children make sense of the chaos.

"Kids are like sponges and are really absorbing everything, and it's safe to assume kids have had some exposure to the news," O'Brien says. "If they don't have that guidance, they might create a narrative in their head that's inaccurate and not helpful for them."

First and foremost: You are safe.

Often the first thing kids think about in the wake of chaotic news is whether they're safe. O'Brien advises reiterating that your role as caregiver is to protect them, and that you'll always do that.

It's also appropriate to tell kids that it's OK to feel scared, which models how you handle anxiety as well. "Normalize and validate how they're feeling," she says. "You can say, 'You're feeling scared about this. Me, too. This is scary and it's normal to feel that way.'"

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“They might perceive events as happening close by,” O’Brien says. “So you can use a map to show where events are happening and that where they are is safe.”

Getting the conversation started

Janine Domingues, a clinical psychologist specializing in anxiety and mood disorders at the Child Mind Institute, says you can start off by asking kids what they know and what they’ve heard, because they’re absorbing it in the background.

“We want to come from a place of hearing what they know first so we can provide information and distill it with details as needed,” she says. “Follow up with how they’re feeling and what they’re thinking to validate their natural responses. To answer questions, say, ‘That’s a really good question and I don’t know the answer, but we can try to find out together.’”

O’Brien agrees that even if kids don’t immediately come to you with questions, it’s still a good idea to bring it up since they’ll sense something has happened. You can start by asking your kids if they have questions or thoughts about it.

“You could say, ‘You may have seen or heard something that happened today that was pretty scary and I wanted to see if you had any questions,’ or, ‘Let’s talk about what happened today,’” she says. “It’s a great opportunity to ask them questions about what their understanding is, what their perception is.”

Other advice: Bring up the topic calmly and straightforwardly; be truthful, but don’t go into information overload. “Share as much as they need to know, provide short and concise answers to their questions, and be honest and open to their questions,” O’Brien says.

That said, Heyman recommends against promising the news won’t mentally affect kids.

“As kids get older, they need to learn their parents can’t control everything,” she says. “These are good opportunities for learning and making sense of the world. That doesn’t mean you need to tell them every single detail, but I’d tell a child as much as they want as long as they’re not having anxiety.”

Explaining bad behavior

O’Brien says kids may have questions about why people are acting in this way, or why it’s OK for them to mob the U.S. Capitol and not follow the rules.

“You can say that when people feel not in control of certain things, their feelings get really big and their behavior gets out of control,” she says. “When that happens it can look really scary.”

Domingues adds that kids might also be asking about people’s anger and why they’re doing something that doesn’t seem appropriate. She advises parents to just be honest.

“You can say, ‘Everyone is feeling a different way about the election, and this is one way they’re expressing it,’” she says. “‘As a family, we might do this differently, but this is how they’re choosing to do it. But other people are stepping in to keep the peace and keep everyone safe.’ It’s important to highlight there are people who are keeping people safe.”

And though you might have strong opinions about what’s going on, parents should resist the temptation to propagandize to their children.

“We see kids as young as kindergarten talking about how people with different political beliefs are ‘bad guys,’” she says. “Instead, use this as an opportunity to explain how complicated the world is”

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“Maintain your sense of calm and feeling of regulation,” she says. “Use whatever coping skills you have, then be open: ‘I feel anxious about this, let’s take deep breaths, maybe we can turn off the TV and go for a walk.’

“Use this as an opportunity to model how to manage big life stressors.”

Beyond that, O’Brien says you can ask your kids what would help them to feel safe, and then try to keep their routine as normal as possible. Also, limit their exposure to news, and if they do read or see something on a phone or tablet, make sure you’re part of what they’re seeing.

“It’s not keeping it from them but making sure you’re part of it,” she says. “That way you can keep control of the conversation and be aware of what they’re getting.”

Lastly, Domingues says parents should remember that this isn’t just a one-time conversation.

“There will be continuous media coverage on it, and you’ll need to check in again, leaving open lines of communication,” she says. “As parents absorb more information, we’re there to be the filter for our children. So today it’s helpful to start the dialogue and tell them that you can talk about it as they have more questions.”

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