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HEALTH

How to help kids deal with frightening news out of the US Capitol

By **Malcolm Gay** Globe Staff, Updated January 8, 2021, 1:19 p.m.



"The most important thing for parents to do is be honest and genuine," says Dr. Robert Sege, director of the Center for Community-Engaged Medicine at Tufts Children's Hospital. ADOBE STOCK

Disturbing images of marauding Americans who mobbed the nation's Capitol this week presented a fresh challenge for parents already stretched thin by the pandemic: How best to talk with their children about the chaos that's enveloped the country's political system? For possible answers, the Globe spoke with Dr. Robert Sege, director of the

Center for Community-Engaged Medicine at Tufts Children's Hospital, about how

Center for Community-Engaged Medicine at Icahn Children's Hospital, about how

parents can soothe frightened youth while not shying away from difficult conversations.

Q. Are there specific strategies parents can employ to speak with children about the news coming out of Washington, D.C., this week?

A. The most important thing for parents to do is be honest and genuine.

Personally, I think this is one of the most shocking and sad days I've lived through. It's fine for children to hear that, to let them know that what they saw was historic, and that they're going to remember this day for a long time. Having a parent help explore what that means, without telling you what to think, is really important.

The second thing is don't assume you know what the child's worried about.

I would suggest parents ask the child, whatever age they are, what they've heard and how they feel about it. Take some cues from them. What you're really trying to do as a parent is help the child understand the world, and, to the extent possible, make them feel safe at home. So understanding the child's worries and concerns is a good place to start.

Q. Were there specific images or scenes you found particularly concerning from a child's perspective? Are there special considerations or concerns for Jewish kids or children of color?

A. Absolutely. I was thinking about that when I saw the white man with the Confederate flag in the rotunda. We've been dealing with horrible images of racism in the United States, beginning with Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, but also the way peaceful demonstrators were handled around the country. This is an opportunity for parents to talk with their kids about race and racism: what it means; how sometimes it's conscious, sometimes it's unconscious.

For teens, especially, the contrast between how [Wednesday's] mob was handled and how peaceful demonstrators were handled after George Floyd's death is really striking.

They've undoubtedly been bombed with memes putting side-by-side pictures of police responses to the two circumstances.

It's important for parents, whatever their race or ethnicity, to acknowledge that race was one of the determining factors this week.

Q. How can families be honest with young people while also helping them feel safe?

A. They're the same: One of the ways you feel safe as a child is feeling you have a close relationship with your parents.

Most parents have a degree of sadness and anger over what transpired. It's possible to talk about that. When you ask a child how they feel, you can say: Well, this is how I feel, or this is what I think should happen.

For younger children, the message that the world is safe and their parents and home are safe is really important. They need to feel that way. For teenagers, they need to feel they can have an honest conversation with their parents about a difficult topic.

Q. What are some good strategies for children who can't sleep because they're upset or worried about safety?

A. It depends on the age of the child, but I would start by asking them what they're thinking about and try to help them process their thoughts.

Simple breathing exercises often help. Sometimes, thinking about how a person they care for might have responded can be helpful, or even, frankly, what they would do if they were king and got a chance to fix everything.

Mainly, you want to engage them in some conversation that isn't doom-scrolling: Being upset about it is normal, but the world isn't going to end.

Q. So many kids are interested in government, particularly in the past four years. What advice would you give parents about their child's media consumption?

A. This goes back to your sleep question: You shouldn't take your phone to bed with you. If you're having trouble sleeping, you have to stop using your phone an hour or two before you want to go to sleep.

You also want to encourage kids to share what they see so you can help process it with them. One of the things about media consumption is deconstructing who says what, where it came from, and what it really means.

Q. Are there things we didn't cover that you think are important?

A. Parents should encourage teenagers and older kids who want to get engaged in politics or in their community. It helps them develop a sense that they matter, which they do. Younger kids may want art or music or some other way to express what they're feeling. It's not all words. Sometimes you just need to go outside and run to blow off steam.

Interview was edited and condensed.

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