

Talking with Young People After the Election



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The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. —Martin Luther King, Jr.

The outcome of the lengthy, emotional and controversial 2016 presidential election campaign can be difficult to sort out, especially for young people. We know that children and teens were more engaged than ever in the current campaign and they had a lot to say about it. Now, it's time to support them in processing their feelings, understanding what happened and thinking together about what to do next. Whether you are a parent, family member, teacher or adult in the lives of young people, here are some ways for you to help.

Take care of yourself first

No matter how you feel about the outcome of the election, it is important to acknowledge that this was a monumental and emotional campaign. As airplane safety instructions wisely advise: put your oxygen mask on before you help others with theirs. This is especially true when talking with children. Acknowledge and express the myriad of feelings you may have, talk with others and take care of yourself first—whatever this means for you. It is important to do that before you discuss this with young people so you can be there fully there for them.

Allow young people to express their feelings

There are always strong feelings right after an election, especially one as intense as this one. Give young people the time and space to express their feelings and just listen. In one-on-one discussions, don't judge any of their feelings and don't jump to solutions or problem-solving right away. In a school setting, provide opportunities for them to talk with others either as a class or in small groups. It is important for them to get their feelings out. Because the discussion could potentially ignite conflict and increased hurt feelings, this would be a good time to review classroom guidelines and if you haven't done so already, discuss with young people how to [establish a safe and respectful learning environment](#) including: respecting others and their points of view, speaking from your own personal experiences, asking questions, respecting confidentiality, etc. You could also consider putting youth into "affinity groups" so they could discuss their feelings with those who feel similarly.

Answer questions

Try as best as you can to answer their questions. Young people will have a lot of different questions about the election—some factual, some opinion and some about what comes next. Questions like:

- How did this happen?
- What does this mean?

- Will I be safe?
- What can I do?
- What if I feel differently about the outcome than my friends?
- Who voted and how?
- How did the campaign impact the outcome?

If you don't know the answers to the questions, acknowledge that and together try to find the answer. If youth are very compelled to learn more, consider doing a lesson, unit or project on the current election.

Be honest about your thoughts and feelings

While you should not assume young people feel similarly to you, if they ask how you feel about the results, be honest. Young people will pick up on what you think and it is important that you model honesty and truthfulness. This can be a tricky balance because at the same time, you do not want to judge their thoughts and feelings or have them be influenced by yours. But as adults in their lives, it is important that young people know how we feel about things and that we are always open to hearing new information.

Re-commit to fighting bias, bullying and stereotyping

There is no doubt that a great deal of bias, stereotyping and scapegoating took place during this election cycle. In schools, communities and society, a very public conversation took place with people sharing concerns about the rhetoric in the campaign. You need to convey that while things have changed and we have now elected a President, our analysis of bias and bigotry is unchanged and that we—as a family and/or school community—will continue to confront bias in all forms.

Tell them you will protect and fight for them

It is important that all young people know that their parents, family members, teachers and friends are there for them and will protect them. Many young people are afraid, especially those who identify in groups targeted during the campaign. It is important that you let them know you believe in them and you will work to keep them out of harm's way. At the same time, do not make false promises but be a role model in standing up for what's fair and right. If they are being bullied or don't feel safe, encourage them to let someone know.

Be aware of social media

Teens and tweens will be reading thoughts and comments through their [social media feeds](#). Some of this can be very scary and dark and they also may read posts that contradict their thoughts and elicit strong feelings. Be sure to ask them about what they are reading on Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. Talk about what they share with you and ask how they feel about it. Remember that social media is a way that young people connect with each other and share thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to use these social networking sites to bond with others and express themselves.

Encourage activism

Especially for young people who are feeling hopeless and helpless, remind them that throughout history, as a society we have stood up to injustice and made significant and lasting change. Let them know that there are a variety of ways that they can get [engaged in activism](#), including educating others, participating in local election campaigns, demonstrating, writing letters, etc. Share with youth what Martin Luther King, Jr. said that still holds true:

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Help them find ways to work towards that justice.