Bias in the Presidential Election

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events

Topic Summary

Election years usually present rich opportunities for parents and educators to talk with young people about civics, the electoral process, how government works and politics. This presidential election year, however, has left many feeling hesitant about how to raise the topic and specifically, how to approach the negative and biased discourse that has characterized much of the current debate.

This presidential election campaign, more so than previous campaigns, has seen an unfortunate amount of hate-filled language, proposals based on biased assumptions and candidates bullying each other. Specifically, we have seen
stereotyping of many groups including women and immigrants, threats to ban Muslims from living in the country and pronouncements that Islam “hates” America, mocking of disabled people, and political candidates attacking one another based on their physical appearance. There have been at least ten campaign events in which violence has taken place.

And quite naturally, this political demagoguery has had an impact on young people. Muslim children are expressing fear and sadness, some even asking their parents if they are going to have to leave the country after the election. At an Indiana high school basketball game, students erupted into screaming and insults; the predominately white team yelled at the opposing players and fans, who were a predominately Latino team, chanting “no comprende,” “speak English” and “build the wall” (referring to the proposal that a wall be built on the Mexican border to keep immigrants out). Latino and other immigrant children worry that they may be deported when there is a new president in the White House.

The Southern Poverty Law Center recently surveyed approximately 2,000 teachers, finding that this election campaign is having “a profoundly negative impact on schoolchildren across the country.” Specifically:

- More than two-thirds of the teachers reported that students—mainly immigrants, children of immigrants and Muslims—have expressed concerns or fears about what might happen to them or their families after the election.
- More than half have seen an increase in uncivil political discourse.
- More than one-third have observed an increase in anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiment.
- More than 40% are hesitant to teach about the election.

Regardless of political party, the current tone and discourse is counter to what many parents aspire to teach their kids about respect, diversity, bias, language, stereotyping and civil discourse. While parents and teachers may feel cautious about discussing the topic, it is important to talk about these issues so that young
people, who see adults (including politicians) as role models, do not subconsciously integrate this thinking into their own. It can be, instead, a teachable moment.

**Age**
10 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**
- Have your friends and classmates been talking about the election and the candidates? How so?
- How do you feel about what you have been seeing and hearing in the presidential election campaign?
- Are there issues and topics you have heard from candidates that you agree with? Disagree with?
- In what ways do you think the tone of the presidential campaign has been positive and inclusive? How do you think it has been negative and biased?
- How do you think the language and tone of this election are impacting young people’s ideas about diversity?

**Questions to Dig Deeper**
Have you noticed whether friends or classmates are mimicking some of what is being said from the campaign? How does that make you feel?

- When you hear friends and classmates make biased or stereotypical statements that are coming from the election, how can you address it with them?
- Why do you think some of the candidates are saying what they are saying with the tone they are using?
- If you could meet each of the candidates, what would you say to them?
Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Learn more about the issues and be a critical consumer of the presidential campaign by watching debates, reading articles, studying the media portrayal of candidates, watching campaign advertisements and reading candidates’ speeches.

- If you want to support a particular candidate or issue, get involved in activism efforts around that issue or candidate.

- Share what you know and learn about the campaign with others by organizing an educational forum in school and/or sharing information on social media.