

Family Support: Helping Children Process Violence

It is important to provide children the space to work through their own thoughts on current events like the violence seen at the Nation's Capital yesterday.

The adults supporting children should have age appropriate, open and honest conversations with children about what is happening and why, including acknowledging that a child may have feelings they need help processing.

Ask and Listen First

Begin by asking your children questions, parenting expert Dr. Deborah Gilboa told *Pittsburgh Today Live* on Thursday. "Say, 'What did you hear and what did you think?' Because that lets you enter the conversation where they are with a minimum of assumptions on your part," she said.

1. Keep the conversation age-appropriate

- a. Conversations will vary depending on the age of the child. For example, when talking about violence, young elementary school children will need brief and simple information and reassurance that adults will protect them.

2. Limit a child's exposure to the media.

According to the Children's Hospital:

- a. Adults supporting children should also consider limiting access to the news, even when it is on in the background as they play. Instead, be intentional with what children are allowed to watch and ask them about what they are seeing and if they have any questions.

3. Be Honest, but make sure the child knows they are safe.

- a. "Say, 'What did you hear and what did you think?'" Because that lets you enter the conversation where they are with a minimum of assumptions on your part," she said. And while she said the American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents not to speak to children under the age of 8 about scary topics unnecessarily, she said that when the issues affect them and they're unavoidable, it's best for children to hear about them at home. "That gives them a person who's safe and knowledgeable, at least about them and what they need ... that they can process this with."



- b. According to the Child Mind Institute, first, we've got to correct any misinformation they might have, based on what they heard in the news or from friends at school.
- c. Then we should give them age-appropriate information about what is being done about the situation. Kids feel better when they know how a situation is being handled so explain to them what adults are doing to keep things safe," the Child Mind Institute states.
- d. "It's key for educators not to assume they know how their students are feeling and responding to events. Rather than interpreting behavior, like a student who seems distracted or agitated, teachers should "investigate feelings," Brackett said. One student may look angry when they are actually scared, and a student may seem defiant and disengaged when they are actually overwhelmed."

Tackle Race & Violence in an Age-Appropriate Way

An opportunity to take this conversation further:

- a. Considering the fact that our children saw, and often participated in, [protests against racial injustice](#) in 2020, we've got to talk to them about the difference between those protests and the unlawful violence that took place this week. We can, in fact, discuss the symbols of white supremacy carried by the rioters, as well as the anti-democratic actions they were taking.
- b. If you want to delve further into a civics lesson with older children, this [PBS News Hour teachers guide](#) is a good place to start. It shows the stark difference between law enforcement's actions on Wednesday, versus the [Black Lives Matter](#) protests last summer.
- c. You can also discuss other moments in history when uprisings turned violent — including the Revolutionary War and the Civil War — and then look at how people eventually recovered from those times.

Sources:

1. [How to talk to your kids about violence at the U.S. Capitol](#), Jessica Seaman, The Denver Post, January 7, 2021.
2. [Don't Shy Away From Talking to Your Kids About The D.C. Violence](#), Sabrina Rojas Weiss, MSN News, January 7, 2021