Supporting Marginalized Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Caregivers

Processing major events in the world can be difficult for many children. For example, incidents of violence and international conflict can expose children to disturbing images or stories. Children and families can struggle to understand hate-based violence, discrimination, or speech in their own communities or abroad. Elections and campaigns represent significant transition moments for the country and can generate feelings of stress and uncertainty. Strong emotions, public division, and shifting policies can make such events feel uncontrollable, even high-risk, regardless of the outcome. Children may be concerned for the well-being of themselves, their families, and their friends.

Students from diverse groups that have experienced marginalization may be especially vulnerable to stressors. Currently, many students who themselves are, or live in families with, immigrants, refugees, persons of color, Jewish Americans, Arab Americans, Muslims, or LGBTQ+ persons, among others, are reporting feeling targeted and unsafe. The following tips and related resources can help caregivers support students during trying times.

- **Promote a sense of safety for children and ensure their well-being by doing the following.**
  - Set limits on television and social media and monitor what children are viewing, as too much exposure can increase fears.
  - Provide a consistent structure and routine for children, as this helps to generate a sense of psychological safety.
  - Provide a safe place for your children to talk about their fears.
  - Encourage healthy and safe coping strategies.
  - Emphasize that there are many adults who care deeply about them and who will do all they can to ensure that children and their families are safe and remain together.
  - Maintain contact with your children’s teachers, as they can connect children with supports through the school where they can talk through their feelings and reactions.
  - Seek help immediately from the school’s psychologist, counselor, social worker, or nurse if your child is experiencing strong emotional reactions or if you have noticed significant changes to their behavior.
  - If students are out of school for the summer or on a break, families should contact the child's pediatrician or community mental health providers to address social, emotional, or behavioral needs. It is important to also communicate these needs with the school in the event that school-based supports are available and to ensure ongoing care for those children needing continued services.
  - Immediately report any instances of bullying, harassment, or discrimination that your child observes or experiences to school administrators or relevant community leaders.
  - Report hate crimes to local law enforcement.

- **Be aware that stressors and trauma can affect functioning in daily life.** Experiencing stress and adversity can contribute to both internal symptoms (such as anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, and
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isolation) and external behaviors (such as reactivity, aggression, and behavior problems). Children may be concerned about actions or statements that they hear or see in the news. Recent events in their communities or reported in the media may cause children to fear that they or their family and friends may be targeted because of their gender, race, cultural or religious background, sexual orientation, or immigration status.

• **Watch for concerning reactions that you should monitor in your children, such as:**
  - Isolation or refusal to engage in learning activities (in-person or virtual).
  - Withdrawal from peers or social activities.
  - Withdrawal from activities that they used to enjoy.
  - Reports of bullying, harassment, or intimidation in school (in-person or virtual), in the community, or on social media.

• **Remember that adults’ reactions can influence children’s reactions.** Children may look to adults to determine how to respond and cope with stress. You can model appropriate coping strategies in the following ways.
  - Communicate with loved ones about feelings and healthy coping strategies.
  - Take care of your own physical and mental health.
  - Make time to do things you enjoy with family and friends in your community.
  - Access school and community resources. Many schools have parent or cultural liaisons who can help connect families to supports in their communities.
  - Help others in your community by referring them to helpful resources.

• **Reinforce and focus on your child's strengths and promote their sense of belonging.** All children and families bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge to our society. Build and emphasize those strengths in the following ways.
  - Help your children find others who allow them to share their knowledge about their origins, customs, and culture.
  - Connect children with community groups or organizations aligned with their interests and issues they care about.
  - Identify positive activities that can help your children feel they are heard. For example, students can write a letter to their elected leaders or current candidates expressing their hopes and desires for specific public policy priorities.
  - Identify activities your children can engage in to show support and solidarity for each other and for their local and school communities.

Remember that at any time, should you or your children struggle with feelings of stress, please reach out to your school and community organizations for support. While many families may fear drawing attention to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, there are individuals and organizations who want to help. Talk to representatives of your school or local cultural or faith organizations.

**RELATED NASP RESOURCES**


• Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth During Troubling Times, [https://www.nasponline.org/x42495.xml](https://www.nasponline.org/x42495.xml)
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- Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home, [https://www.nasponline.org/x55114.xml](https://www.nasponline.org/x55114.xml)
- Depression: Helping Handout for School and Home, [https://www.nasponline.org/x55110.xml](https://www.nasponline.org/x55110.xml)

Note. This handout was adapted from the NASP handout, “Supporting Marginalized Students in the Context of the 2020 Election: Tips for Parents.” Schools and community agencies may adapt this handout to local needs for educational and student support purposes as long as proper credit is given to NASP.

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