Supporting Children & Families during a Difficult Time

Many early educators and program leaders are concerned about the impact of the recent election on children and families. Young children might have been witness to disturbing media, heated conversations between adults, and/or reports of community unrest. Some children might be confused, feel anxious, or have behavioral issues in the classroom. Some families might be feeling vulnerable or concerned about anticipated changes in national policies, national protests, and reports of community violence. The following are suggestions for program leaders and practitioners for addressing potential issues and supporting young children and their families.

For Program Leaders

- Remember that both adults and children may be having a difficult time. Remind families of your program expectations (e.g., "Be a Friend, "Be Safe") through a visual display, letter that goes home with the children, on your social media page, or through other modes of communication. Describe how these are expectations for both adults and children and the expectations are actively taught in the program.

- Consider posting a statement on your bulletin board, web site, or program door. The statement can reiterate your commitment to providing a safe, nurturing environment for all children and staff, and families. Your statement might reassure families that your staff will continue to work together to maintain a welcoming and supportive environment where all children and families are valued.

- In your communication with families, you might wish to provide information on limiting child exposure to media that is disturbing or difficult for the child to understand. There are resources from the Academy of Pediatrics (https://healthychildren.org) and other organizations that could be helpful reminders.

- Encourage your staff members to engage in self-care. Encourage staff to talk with you or a trusted colleague if they are feeling fearful or anxious. If you are unsure of what to say to a staff member who is anxious or stressed, try responses that acknowledge their concerns and express support such as "I'm so sorry you are going through this"; "I can't imagine how hard this is for you"; or "This can't be easy for you right now."

- Remind staff that when they are stressed, they may well react more quickly to "hot button" child behaviors (i.e., behaviors that are likely to trigger an undesired response by the adult). If they are feeling this way, offer to provide them with a break or some other form of support.

- Use a suggestion box for staff to recommend how they can support each other best.

For Practitioners

- Maintain a consistent and predictable routine. During times like this, children need consistency and predictability.

- Remind children that the classroom is a safe place and that your job is to keep them safe. If they feel like they need help, encourage them to seek out an adult.

- Provide extra support to children by engaging in conversations, playing with them, and helping them problem solve difficult situations.

- Respond to children's challenging behavior by validating their emotions and supporting them to engage in prosocial behavior. If a child has a behavior support plan, be sure to implement it consistently. Other children might need reminders or support in using the prosocial and emotional regulation skills that have been previously taught.

- Assist or encourage children in using problem solving strategies like getting an adult, walking away from difficult situations, and taking a break when they need it. You may need to spend some time teaching or re-teaching children to use problem solving strategies and other social skills and acknowledge them more frequently when they do.

- Revisit your classroom or program expectations (e.g., "Be Safe", "Be a Friend"). Create engaging teaching activities using puppets, role-plays, and children's literature that guide children to reflect on the expectations and how they are used in the classroom.

- Assist children who are expressing strong emotions by teaching self-regulation, anger management, or social problem solving skills. Use visuals (see resources) to help children understand and practice the skill.

- Support children by responding to their questions. Actively confront bullying or other conflicts that might occur using social emotional teaching strategies.

- If a child seems unusually distressed or is engaging in behavior that is concerning, share your observations with the family and ask them about how you might work in partnership to address the concerns.

- Spend more time and effort making positive comments to children. Be intentional about fostering a climate of acceptance and warmth in your classroom.

- Model using your own feeling words when appropriate, emphasizing that feelings can and do change.

Resources

Below are some resources that we feel can be very helpful as you guide young children in learning social and emotional skills and create a nurturing classroom:

1. Self-Regulation visuals for teaching children to calm themselves
   » http://headstartinclusion.org/teacher-tools#visual

2. Tucker the Turtle story and visuals for helping children manage anger
   » http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html

3. Solution kit resources for teaching children to problem solve with peers
   » http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html
   » http://headstartinclusion.org/teacher-tools#visual

4. Initiating peer interaction visuals to teach children to play with others
   » http://headstartinclusion.org/teacher-tools#visual

5. Materials that families can use to help children with disappointment, sadness, and anger
   » http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_disappointment.pdf
   » http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_anger.pdf
   » http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_recognize_sadness.pdf

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