

School Safety and Crisis

Supporting Marginalized Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Educators

Transitions and change can be difficult for all children. For example, presidential elections signify the transition from one administration to a new administration. While some students may be overjoyed by the president who has been elected, others may be dismayed that their, or their family's, candidate of choice did not win. During this time, it can be difficult for children to understand what statements made during the campaign will mean for their future. They may be concerned for the well-being of themselves, their families, and their friends. As such, it is an important time for us to come together, work together, and respect one another.

Schools across the country are welcoming and serving students from diverse backgrounds. Each student brings their unique cultures and individual backgrounds. 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, undocumented immigrants, unaccompanied minors, refugees, persons of color, Muslims, or LGBTQ persons, among others, are reporting feeling targeted and unsafe. The following tips and related resources can help educators support students during trying times.

Understand the effect of stressors and trauma on school functioning. Extreme stress, adversity, and trauma can impede concentration, cognitive functioning, memory, and social relationships. Additionally, stress can contribute to both internalized symptoms—such as hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, isolation—and externalized behaviors—such as startle responses, reactivity, aggression, and conduct problems. Given the often chronic and significant stress placed on students from diverse backgrounds, many are at increased risk for experiencing trauma and developing other mental health problems, undermining their ability to function effectively in school. Many children may not understand the political process and assume that statements they have heard on the news will happen immediately and may be fearful about impending changes. Therefore, teachers might see absences, distracted behaviors, withdrawal, irritability, and other changes in students who may feel that they, their family members, or their friends have been targeted in conversations and events around them.

Equip staff to provide trauma-sensitive responses and supports. Students from marginalized groups are at risk for experiencing trauma and the additive risk of multiple traumas. Creating trauma-sensitive schools greatly enhances supports for all traumatized students. A trauma-sensitive school views behavior as a potential outcome of life circumstances rather than willful disobedience or intentional misbehavior. Trauma-sensitive approaches emphasize helping school staff understand the impact of trauma on school functioning and seeing behavior through this lens; building trusting relationships among teachers and peers; helping students develop the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention; supporting student success in academic and nonacademic areas;

and promoting physical and emotional health. Additional information is available at <http://traumasensitiveschools.org>.

Be sensitive to family stressors. Parents and other family members are also dealing with the stress of transitioning to a new administration. This may cause financial or employment uncertainty and concerns about the political forecast. Groups who may have felt marginalized during the election cycle may feel an increased sense of marginalization at its close. Additionally, some parents may have experienced significant stress throughout the election, which can lead to increased risk for a range of negative outcomes for their children.

Identify children and youth who are at high risk and plan interventions. Schools bear a responsibility to identify students that may be at heightened risk based on the factors outlined above. In general, interventions delivered within comprehensive service models (i.e., multitiered systems of support) and focused on educational, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes are more effective than clinical treatment alone and can often prevent the need for intensive, direct services. However, by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, a variety of school-based teams (e.g., crisis response) can determine which students may require more intensive crisis intervention and/or counseling services. Schools should also create a mechanism for self-referral and parental referral of students. Checking in with students known to be at heightened risk about their perceptions of safety and their emotional state can be useful as well.

Understand cultural views regarding mental health. It is important that mental health professionals be aware of attitudes toward mental illness and the role of mental health services when providing assistance to students. Many cultures may have different conceptualizations of mental illness, and in some cultures and faith communities, mental health problems may be stigmatized. Some cultures may view emotional distress as a weakness in character as opposed to a natural response to change, stressors, and adversity. Understanding these differences is an essential first step to comforting and engaging students and their families and ultimately building the trust necessary to provide effective services and supports.

Engage and empower families. Families may have different views about education, including the assumption that education remains the duty of the school and any involvement would encroach on that responsibility. Some immigrant and refugee families may not be proficient enough in English to know how to engage, despite a desire to do so. Additionally, many families may experience practical barriers, such as not having a car, or employment that does not allow for active engagement during school hours. Some families may fear calling additional attention to themselves and their diverse backgrounds. Schools can work with cultural liaisons and families to find ways to connect with parents and ensure they have opportunities to meaningfully participate in their child's schooling. Schools may consider reaching out to local community organizations that support marginalized groups to gather additional resources on how to support families from diverse backgrounds. Securing translators may be needed as well.

Access community resources. It is important to compile and maintain an accurate and evolving list of community resources available to help impacted families. This should include the name, telephone number, website (if available), contact person (if appropriate), a description of services, and fees if charged. To specifically support immigrant and refugee families, it can be useful to reach out to community organizations that specialize in working with these families if those resources are available, such as the International Rescue Committee (http://www.rescue.org/where/united_states).

Consider also reaching out to State Refugee Coordinators (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>). Local universities and colleges may offer tutorial services, English classes, mentorship, and summer programs for refugees. For all marginalized students and families, attempt to determine if support groups are being provided at local churches or community agencies.

Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately. Given the tone of the most recent election cycle, children may feel bullying and intimidation are acceptable. Make it clear that such behavior, in any form (in person, online, on social media), is unacceptable. Promote acceptance and actively teach conflict resolution skills to the perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. Report hate crimes to law enforcement and the Southern Poverty Law Center (<https://www.splcenter.org/report-hate>).

Focus on student strengths, and promote a sense of belonging. All students bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge into the classroom and school community. Build on those strengths. To promote a sense of belonging in the school, consider having students who are comfortable share their knowledge about their origins, customs, and culture. Reassure all students that they belong and are welcome community members in their schools. Activities that make students feel like they are heard may also be beneficial. For example, students can write a letter to the president-elect expressing their hopes and desires for the new administration. The school principal may wish to make a loudspeaker announcement such as:

Yesterday, (insert brief, factual statement of event) happened. So, what does that mean for us at ABC School? It means we continue as a community of respect, love, and welcome for all. As a school community, it is not a time to divide, hurt, or say mean things. It is a time for us to come together, work together, and respect each and every one of us. ABC is a family, and everyone should feel physically and emotionally safe here. We will all make sure that happens. Teachers, if there are students who need extra support with this, I am here to help!

RESOURCES FOR HELPING STUDENTS REMAIN MINDFUL DURING THE TRANSITION OF POWER

- Take on the Day
<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/think-about-it/take-on-the-day?source=search>
- Airtime Space
<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/game-on/airtime-space?source=search>
- Airtime (select state in which you live and take a mindful journey through your state landscape)
<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/game-on/airtime?source=search>
- Let It Go
<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/think-about-it/let-it-go?source=search>
- Tune in to Your World (older kids)
<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/empower-tools/tune-in-to-your-world-1?source=search>

RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)
<http://www.brycs.org>

- National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network, Child and Adolescent Refugee Trauma
<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/refugee-and-war-zone-trauma>
- Partnering With Parents and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School
<http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2009/06/partnering-with-parents-and-families-to-support-immigrant-and-re.html>
- Screening and Assessing Immigrant and Refugee Youth in School-Based Mental Health Programs
http://www.issuelab.org/resource/screening_and_assessing_immigrant_and_refugee_youth_in_schoolbased_mental_health_programs
- Teaching Tolerance
<http://www.tolerance.org>

Note. This handout was adapted from the NASP handout, “Supporting Refugee Children and Youth: Tips for Educators.”

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