“What are we going to do?”

How to Talk to Your Children about the Election Results

“How are there so many people that hate us?” “Dad, are the kids at school right? Are we going to have to leave our homes?” These heartbreaking questions are overwhelming for so many of us. Many are wondering what to do and how to react. The Family and Youth Institute is here for you. Take a deep breath and read on for tips and pointers to help guide you through this uncertain time.

Process Your Own Fears and Anxiety First

You may be feeling anxious and struggling to try to make sense of the election results and implications on your family, your job, and even your bank account. Remember what you do have control over and focus on that!

- Take a break – including unplugging from news and social media, and take care of yourself. Rely on these suggested coping skills that may help you at this moment.
- Reach out to support people to help you process your thoughts and feelings.
- While you may be stressed, it is important to not pass it on to your children.
- Keep in mind that how adults react has an impact on kids. Children are watching and often know when their parents are going through a stressful situation. Be conscious of what you say, how you say it, and your non-verbals, because children are interpreting your behavior and learning how to react themselves.
- If you are still processing your emotions, that is okay. This just may not be the best time to talk to your child. It’s better to gently say, “I really want to talk to you about it...but can we talk about it in a little bit?” Delaying the conversation will give you time to process your own feelings instead of projecting them onto your child.
- Once you have taken time to process your own feelings, be sure to model both vulnerability and strength when speaking with your child. You do not have to be a pillar of strength that seems to have it all together, but you also do not want to be falling apart at the seams. While it is okay for your child to see you in a controlled state of frustration, you want to make sure you are helping
them feel secure and reassured that they have a place to come to without making you more upset.

- Make sure you are stable and able to listen to your children because it is the key in helping them in the long run.

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### Listen to Your Children

It is important that we begin by listening to our children before jumping into troubleshooting mode or trying to solve what we perceive to be their concerns. First understand what is going on in your child’s mind, what are they actually worried about, and what are their immediate concerns. You do not want to elevate your child’s anxiety by responding to a different concern than the one they are expressing. If you have multiple children at different developmental stages, it might be good to talk at the youngest’s level as a family and then speak individually with the older children.

- Listening effectively builds a strong bond of trust with your child. Being able to truly hear them while they have deep concern can build a stronger relationship of mutual respect and security. Listening, rather than advising, lets your child know that you are there for him or her.

- Listen with more than your ears. Be aware of your child's nonverbal communication and most importantly be aware of your own. Remove distractions (i.e. phone, computers) and give your children your undivided attention. Try not to react to what they say with frustration, hurt, anger or horror. It can discourage them from approaching you in the future and might distract them from getting to the heart of their concern.

- Help them name their emotions (angry, disappointed, terrified, disgust, scared, etc.). Labeling emotions helps in processing them and ultimately assists in coming back to a more balanced state.

- This one is big! Don't minimize their concerns and fears, allow them to express their emotions and concerns. For example say, "It sounds like you are feeling (state the emotion). I can understand that or I feel that way as well."

- Open up the conversation by asking questions, for example say, "What are the other things you are fearful/concerned about?"

- Do not suppress the conversation or else it could manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach pain. Similarly if your child is expressing these physical symptoms, consider that they may be expressing their anxiety in a somatic manner and need a space to process their emotions.

- Once they feel they have been heard, then they can begin to heal through faith, feeling secure in their parent’s reaction, and their own action.
Talk to Your Children and Reassure Them

Before talking with your child consider the message you want to convey in your conversation. This can be a key teachable moment. What values and principles could you teach them through this? By planning a little bit ahead of the conversation, you can ensure your message is clearly communicated. Make sure to match your response to child's level of development. How you talk to a 6 year old will be different than a 15 year old. Simple language can be used with younger children. A longer more detailed discussion can be reserved for older children in the absence of younger children who may become overwhelmed. Your children may need to talk about the election results for a number of days in order to process the implications. Just remember the take-home message and feeling, and focus on it!

- How we talk and reassure them can make a difference.
- The election, just like any other life experience, is an opportunity to connect with our children. It provides us with a chance to share our beliefs and values and to exemplify resilience. This is a moment to learn together that when we face hurdles and challenges, we persevere and continue the work. This also serves as an opportunity to develop a sense of grit and shape our youth into moral and successful adults who can deal with adversity and become stronger as a result. Building resilience begins with strengthening our relationship with our children. As parents our relationship with them can help them navigate the difficult road ahead. Be present, be involved, and connect with your child on a regular basis. Help facilitate their growth through their everyday experiences.
- Remind them and reassure them
  - Our political system has checks and balances. Regardless of who is in power, we have rights that are protected. As parents, we need to avoid catastrophizing (believing that something is far worse than it actually is), and maintain a balanced perspective.
  - There was some positive news that came out from last night’s election. For example, Abdullah Hammoud, a young Arab American Muslim won a state legislature seat in Michigan. Ilhan Omar became the first Somali American woman in the country to win a State legislature seat in Minnesota.
  - This is not the first or last time in history that challenging events have taken place. Humanity marches on.
  - Finally, remind yourself and your children that your neighbors and friends are still who they are and we are going to continue to have faith in the good in humanity, but we need to do the hard work to make it a reality.

It is possible that despite your reassurance, your child might not want to talk about their concerns. That is ok. If they are unable to or refuse to open up to you, suggest other adults who can help them. Also consider teen help lines such as Stones to Bridges, Amala Hopeline, or Naseeha.
As parents, we need to model strength in identity and faith. Be proud of your faith identity and convey this message to your children. Research shows that children whose parents transmit information, values and perspectives about their cultural and religious heritage, which includes having a discussion about obstacles they may face because of the group they belong to, are less negatively affected by discrimination. These discussions should be developmentally appropriate depending on your child’s age. For younger children this may include messages of pride while for older children the discussion may also include talk about possible discrimination they face in school and greater society.

“Holding fast to the rope of Allah” is key during times like these and looking to the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a family can help ease some of the anxiety you might be feeling collectively. Here are some reminders to help you remember when at times it may be easy to forget.

- We must first remind ourselves and our children that Allah is in full control over everything. This is a cornerstone of our faith.
  - Abu al-‘Abbas ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abbas (ra) reports: “One day I was riding behind the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, when he said, ‘Young man, I will teach you some words. Be mindful of Allah, and He will take care of you. Be mindful of Him, and you shall find Him at your side. If you ask, ask of Allah. If you need help, seek it from Allah.”
  - “Know that if the whole world were to gather together in order to help you, they would not be able to help you except if Allah had written so. And if the whole world were to gather together in order to harm you, they would not harm you except if Allah had written so. The pens have been lifted, and the pages are dry.” Related by Tirmidhi
- Since Allah is in control of everything, then everything happens according to His plans. Try as we might, it is impossible for us to comprehend everything and the “big picture”. But Allah in His infinite knowledge and mercy has all factors under consideration and is “the best of planners.”
  - “And [remember, O Muhammad], when those who disbelieved plotted against you to restrain you or kill you or evict you [from Makkah]. But they plan, and Allah plans. And Allah is the best of planners.” – Qur’an 8:30
- Put your trust in Allah. Think of all the times in your own past when you initially thought something was awful, but then it turned out okay in the long run.
  - “Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.” – Qur’an 2:216
Shaitan breeds on fear. He wants us to be afraid of our neighbors, of the kids at school, of people at the bus stop. Allah asks us and reminds us to not be afraid of anything but Him. It’s okay to be worried and careful, but try to remind yourself and your family to put their trust in Allah.

“*It is only the Evil One that suggests to you the fear of his followers: Be not afraid of them, but fear Me, if you have Faith.*” – Qur’an 3:175

As parents we need to be optimistic and forward looking. Tomorrow is another school day and those lunches will not pack themselves. Instead of being fearful, we need to patiently persevere by fulfilling our duties to Allah, our community, and our families. If we do our part, then we will ultimately get the reward for it. Allah promises us that nothing good we do will be lost.

“*Oh you who believe, persevere and endure and remain stationed and protect yourselves with Allah that you may be successful.*” – Qur’an 3:200

“*Indeed, Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of the doers of good.*” – Qur’an 9:120

“*Indeed, the people have gathered against you, so fear them.*” But it [merely] increased them in faith, and they said, “*Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs.*” – Qur’an 3:173

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**There is Work to be done – Channel the Energy**

Children who feel helpless about a situation can end up feeling cynical and angry. However, when they feel there is something, anything, they can do to make a difference, they feel empowered.

- When speaking with your child, brainstorm the different situations they are worried about and identify different ways they can choose to react. Rehearse until your child is comfortable.
- Be your child’s role model. Show them through your actions, educate them through resources available in the community and online.

Specifically focus on the following:

- Teach them how to disagree in a civil and cordial fashion starting at home with siblings, parents, and peers.
- Teach them to be actively engaged and responsible members of our society. Educate your child about their rights as American citizens, history of social change and movement, and help them find opportunities to make an impact.
- Teach your children an anti-racist perspective. Bigotry should not be tolerated by anyone, most importantly, your child. We are fortunate to have a number of
organizations working hard to protect the American Muslim community in different ways. If hate incidents occur, please contact CAIR, MLFA, Department Of Justice Civil Rights Division, Muslim Advocates, Muslim Justice League, or the ACLU and they can help guide you through the process. Make sure you provide a space for your child to feel comfortable approaching you if an incident occurs no matter how small it is. The more we report and document, the more we can help our nation.

- Teach them how to organize, collaborate, and form alliances starting with their family, friends, schools, and at the community level. Begin by volunteering in your community, advocate for social justice issues you support or joining a local group and teach them through your actions what can be done.
- Teach them the importance of critical thinking, fact based debates, civil rights, etc. Teach them to speak up for themselves, take action, and find allies and support with peers and other adults.

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**Advocate for Your Child at School**

If you haven’t already, consider being proactive about being your child's advocate at school. It is much better to have an established relationship with your child's school's administrators and teachers than to have to only approach them after an incident occurs. Express your possible concerns for bullying or a hostile school environment and ask what your child's school is doing to prevent this from occurring. The following resources may help guide that discussion.

- Sometimes teachers and administrators might not actually know what the problems facing your child might be. The State Of American Muslim Youth report summarizes the issues and challenges facing Muslim youth and can be used to enhance their knowledge.

- While schools may have a lot of general resources on bullying, there are very few resources currently available for schools regarding bullying of Muslims. Parents can share with their child's schools the following webinar video Helping Educators and Counselors Prevent Bullying of and Discrimination Against our Nation’s Muslim Youth or check out additional resources related to bullying prevention for Muslim children.

- How can the school better support your child? Here is a webinar that can be shared with your child's school on Strategies for Educators, Counselors and Community members To build protective factors for America's Muslim Youth.
Keep on Marching

This election season was a key event in our collective memory as a community. It may cause some short-term angst, but it is also a teachable and character-building moment to reinforce within ourselves and within our children why we are doing what we are doing. As parents, it is important for us to practice self-care. Avoid over-stimulation by constantly checking your news-feeds. This will likely raise your anxiety levels which children will likely pick up on. As a parent and as a family, connect with communities that provide spaces for encouragement, support, and understanding and serve a healing purpose.

Finally, remember, we are doing everything for the pleasure of Allah, the Most High. He is in full control and is the best of planners. We are being tested to see how we will react. We must hold fast to our principles and values, and continue the work that we need to be doing to improve our nation.

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