

GUIDANCE FOR MENTORS ON TALKING TO MENTEES ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS

*Many mentees have experienced past traumatic events such as witnessing violence in their communities, seeing people they love and care about being hurt, or being victims themselves. Seeing violence on television or the internet can be very triggering, especially for children and youths who have been exposed to violence in their lives or identify with those that they perceive as the victims of violence. Many children and youth do not necessarily openly talk about their fears and anxieties. Anxious feelings can last long after the news event is over. Whether they talk about it, concerns about current events can profoundly affect their behavior and mental health. Mentors can play an essential role in helping their mentees make sense of current events and cope with their emotional reactions to what they hear and see around them. Addressing the challenging issues can make your mentee safer, strengthen mentoring bonds, and teach them about the world. **Even though this is designed for use with mentors and mentees, any caring adult can use this with young people in their lives.***

Know Yourself. Before talking to your mentee about current events, first, explore how you feel and plan how you might approach the topic with your mentee. Adults' reactions affect how children and youth react to situations, especially when they feel anxious, fearful, or confused. As a mentor, your behavior can help mentees learn how to discuss challenging topics and share their feelings and concerns.

Remain calm when you talk with your mentee about troubling events, even when you have strong feelings. Being overly animated or emotional can trigger your mentee and increase their anxiety about events. However, being calm does not mean hiding your emotional reactions either. When you share your feelings, mentees learn that these topics are serious to you, too, and they can see how you manage strong emotions.

- **If you do not feel ready to have the conversation with your mentee, you should still address it somehow.** Not saying something could give the impression that you do not care, or you condone what has happened. You can always tell your mentee that the events are disturbing to you, you are processing it, and you can help them identify people to talk to or places to find more information to help them better understand the events if they want. It is essential to show that you understand and validate their feelings.
- **If you feel that you need support to help you deal with your reactions, talk to someone, or seek counseling, if needed.** Getting help can be an opportunity to show your mentee, by example, how to access support and that there is no shame in asking for help when you need it.

Be Age-Appropriate. The way we talk to mentees matters, especially when discussing concepts like democracy or systemic racism. Discuss these issues with children and youth using words, ideas, and relationships that they understand. It is essential to recognize that children of different ages and temperaments perceive the world differently. They have varying complex reasoning skills and can be exposed to a wide variety of information from various sources, e.g., social media, news, their friends.

- **Younger children have more concrete views of the world** and are often concerned about their personal safety and family members' safety. Strategies to use with younger children include breaking down issues into their simplest forms and reassuring them of their safety. You can use stories from books and videos like "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" to help them learn about coping with tough times.
- **Tweens are beginning to develop abstract thinking skills but may still view things very concretely.** They can grapple with difficult subjects and understand different perspectives. Strategies that work well with tweens include providing context for interpreting events, encouraging curiosity, and fostering critical thinking.
- **Teens, on the other hand, are figuring out their own identities and grappling with ethical dilemmas.** They often hear about difficult subjects in the news or other places, including social media, friends, etc. They bristle at lectures and gather their information independently from a variety of sources. Strategies that work with teens include encouraging open dialogue, nurturing critical thinking, and exploring social action.

Start the Conversation. As a mentor, it is appropriate and necessary for you to help mentees process troubling current events. Before launching into a discussion, find out what they know and how they feel about these events. Use open-ended questions like "What have you heard about what happened?" or "How do you feel about what happened last week and what is happening now?" Open-ended questions encourage your mentee to talk about the topic rather than give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. They also help you spot any misinformation or gaps in knowledge and gauge your mentee's levels of anxiety and safety.

- **If your mentee wants to talk about the events, give them space to do so if you feel ready.** However, recognize that mentees may be overwhelmed by challenging emotions like fear and grief in discussing these events. Their emotional safety must be a priority. If they do not want to talk about it, do not push it. Give them space but show that you are willing to talk or help them find other support if they have questions or concerns now or in the future.

Listen, don't lecture. The best way to start the conversation with your mentee is to listen. You can use active listening skills to find out what mentees know about the situation, how they feel about it, and whether they are fearful or concerned about their wellbeing or the wellbeing of others.

Active listening involves letting your mentee share their thoughts and feelings without judging the validity of their statements, immediately responding to what they are saying,

or interrupting to give your views. Let your mentee finish talking before you respond, and pay attention to cues about your mentee's emotional reactions like their choice of words, eye contact, body language, or tone of voice. After your mentee has finished talking, summarize what you heard them say and how you think they may feel. You can say something like, "What I hear you say is (summarize what they said). It sounds like you feel (label the emotion)." This allows your mentee to confirm or correct what you think you heard. This strategy also fosters deeper communication and gives you the opportunity to help them label what they are feeling, e.g., anger, fear, or sadness. You can also encourage reflection by asking probing questions, e.g., "What do you think would happen if...?" to help them think through events and help identify next steps, e.g., looking things up on the internet or talking to counselor or parent about their feelings or advocating for change.

Answer honestly...even if it is 'I don't know'. You may not have all the answers. While you do not need to be an expert on everything, you do need to respond to your mentee's questions about current events. If your mentee has questions about things you do not know, say so. You can help them find the answers by researching information on the internet, looking things up in the library, and talking with other people.

For example, on January 6, 2021, mentees are likely to have questions about what happened at the U.S. Capitol, the legal process, the meaning of insurrection, peaceful protest and the exercise of free speech.

Guide. As a mentor, your role is to help your mentee process events and clarify how they will respond to these events. Mentees are developing their sense of self, moral compass, and cognitive skills. Simultaneously, they are bombarded with a lot of information from multiple sources—good information and misinformation. You can help your mentee learn to think critically about the sources of information to distinguish between fact and fiction. You can join them in their fact-finding efforts, such as learning about new concepts, evaluating the timeline of events and contextual factors, and comparing what happened to other events that have occurred historically. By doing this, you will give your mentees the skills to think critically, use their values as a lens for developing their independent perspective, and determine how they will respond to others who think differently from them.

Confront Racism. Racism is a reality that affects all of us; Negative messages and stereotypes about people of color and other marginalized identities are prevalent in the media and throughout our society. Our federal institutions' policies, practices, and procedures have advantaged the White, straight, cisgender, able-bodied people and disadvantage the rest of us. Everyone is *not* treated equitably. Understanding the dimensions of racism and bias builds self-esteem and can prevent your mentee from internalizing structural factors as indicators of their self-worth or deficiencies of their identity or group identity. Steps that you can take to confront racism includes:

- **Be clear about your values, beliefs, or the realities of what happens when bigotry is allowed to escalate.** It is essential to explicitly name racist events as such and acknowledge that racism is wrong.
- **Recognize that racism harms our society** and leaves the scars of trauma on its victims and marginalized populations.
- **Reflect on your experiences with racism** to prepare yourself to talk to your mentee and enable you to deal with strong uncomfortable emotions that inevitably emerge when addressing these challenging issues.

Acknowledge that everyone has unconscious/implicit biases. You can use tools like the Implicit Association Test, which measures bias around race, gender, sexual orientation, mental health, and other dimensions of the human experience. Completing these tools can be a thought-provoking activity to do with your mentee.

- **Explore books and online resources with your mentee** to provide context for the events, learn new terminology, fact check, and make historical comparisons.
- **Talk with mentees about civil rights laws and procedures** that aim to protect them from hate speech, violence, and bullying.
- **Help your mentee find ways to challenge people who deny that racism exists** or who supported violence to reflect on why they feel that way
- **Assist mentors in finding ways to dissect biased images and messages,** debate stereotypes, stand up for themselves, and manage conflict with others.

To help with these topics, we've included references below.

Encourage coping strategies. In addition to making sense of current events, mentees also need to be directed towards concrete positive coping strategies for working through their thoughts and emotions. Positive coping strategies include talking it out with a trusted adult, unplugging from news and social media, or doing something they enjoy, such as exercise, art, or playing a game. Mentors can talk to them about coping strategies, demonstrate their own coping strategies, and join mentees in activities that promote wellbeing.

Explore advocating for social change. Because current events are often evolving and represent larger systems of oppression in our society, mentees may have to accept there will be no satisfactory closure without social action.

Mentors can motivate mentees to direct their energy toward positive change that they want to see in the world and show them that the right actions can make a real difference. You can help your mentee explore various ways to advocate for social change, e.g., writing letters to government officials, learning about the legislative

process, supporting local business and charitable efforts, and volunteering for advisory boards that promote youth voice.

Resources:

- American Psychological Association. Building Your Resilience. <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>
- The Center for Racial Justice. <https://centerracialjustice.org/resources/resources-for-talking-about-race-racism-and-racialized-violence-with-kids/>
- Commonsense media. <https://www.common sensemedia.org/finding-peace-during-the-protests-digital-wellness-tools-for-black-girl-activists-tiera-chante-tanksley>
- Michigan School of Psychology. <https://msp.edu/msp-anti-racism-resources/anti-racism-resources-for-kids/>
- Project Implicit. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>
- Talking with children about current events: Starting conversations about racism, violence, and justice by Balaguru, S & Breidenstine, A (June 18, 2020) https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1tMxjMLc9HD2b8GKNrAZMb2A5lQ6Xa0w7puUB0CiTR4E/edit#slide=id.g88df4116b5_0_80