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How to talk to children about the Capitol riots: An age by age guide

Experts weigh in on why it's important to explain the news in an honest, age-appropriate way.



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By Meghan Holohan

The scenes from the [rioters](#) breaching the U.S. Capitol are jarring: People scaling walls, Confederate flags, a noose, lawmakers hiding on the floor in terror, a man with his feet propped up on a desk, signs of vandalism and destruction around him. Processing this can be tough for adults let alone children. But children will learn about what happened. If parents don't bring it up, their children might not understand that it's safe to talk about it with their parents.

"We have to be honest in an age-appropriate way," Miguelina Germán, director Pediatric Behavioral Health Services at Montefiore Health System, told [TODAY Parents](#). "If we try to ignore the news and they find out about it another way, either their imagination is going to help them dream up even scarier situations or they may be told about the news in a way that you wouldn't feel comfortable with."

Parents can share their thoughts, too, to start a conversation

"Parents can share feelings, not venting, but acknowledging and admitting that you're sad or you're disappointed, or you're mad," Germán said. "It gives your kids permission to express any feelings they may have."

Whitney Raglin-Bignall, pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, encourages parents to work through their feelings first to allow space for their children's feelings.

"If you're having really strong emotions about it, you might want to make sure you understand them because if we're too strong, we might influence our kids too much," she said. "We do want to be able to talk about it and hear their fears or worries or concerns in a way where we can still be a strong support for them."

When stressful events occur in life, Germán believes it's important that parents keep their normal routines as much as possible so things seem as normal as possible. She and other experts share tips on how parents can talk to their children about what happened no matter what their age.

Preschool and kindergarten

“If you can keep your kids from hearing about this when they are 7 and under there’s no need to go there,” Dr. Deborah Gilboa, a parenting and resiliency expert told TODAY Parents. “But that’s a pretty big ‘if.’”

Children will likely hear about it or see images from it and Gilboa suggest parents start by asking their children a question.

“There was news where there was an event that happened yesterday in Washington, D. C. and then you just ask ‘Did you see it? Do you what it was,’” she said. “It just allows us to enter the conversation where their brain is instead of making assumptions.”

Germán said to try to keep explanations general.

“Say something along the lines of, ‘This is a group of people who are very angry. They are really mad because they didn’t get something that they wanted and they’re making really bad choices,’” she explained.

Elementary school

Again, a question is a good way of understanding what grade school students know. But it is important parents stress they’re around for a chat.

“It’s important for parents to set aside time to talk about it, leave the door open and really start with open any questions,” Raglin-Bignall said. “Parents might be able to then clear up any misunderstandings that the child might have just based on looking or overhearing things

Children this age understand what winning and losing looks like. This gives parents a chance to explore the riot in a context that kids know.

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“This is a really meaningful introduction to the conversation about fairness and about sore losers,” Gilboa said.

Germán agrees.

“I am a huge supporter of sports for children. Playing sports and other types of competitive activities teaches children how to lose and it ties into the notion of fairness. In most sports, not everyone can win. One of the crucial character building aspects of sports you are supposed to congratulate your opponent,” she said. “That is difficult ... It is essential to learn how to lose without becoming violent.”

Middle school

Children in this age group certainly will hear about what happened from friends and from social media. This is a great time to start talking about how people’s words can influence others.

“Here’s a way to have that conversation about responsibility for ideas leading to action,” Gilboa explained. “If you tell your brother, ‘It would be so cool if we put those fireworks on the stove and turned on the gas,’ but you don’t do it. You just mention it. Do you have culpability? Are you accountable for that? ... Most parents would say ‘Yes.’”

Children this age might notice that police treated the white rioters differently than they do people of color or protestors at Black Lives Matter marches and Raglin-Bignall said parents need to talk about racism with their children, even if it feels tough.

“Sometimes talking about racism can be really challenging for families. But children can see that things are being done differently or fairness doesn’t

seem equal and highlighting what children are seeing and processing that with them (is important),” she said. “Providing additional stories and examples can help them to understand things, too.”

High school

High school aged children don't need as much of a hands-on approach.

“The principal rule is to follow their leads. And if they're not asking you a lot of questions, you don't have to force feed them a lot of information. But you can invite them if they want to sit with you and watch the news together,” Germán said. “The more mature your child is, the more sophisticated the explanation can be. They can handle more details. Older children have a greater sense of empathy.”

Parents can bolster their children's empathy and that could help them feel less helpless in a situation.

“One thing we can do is to empower our kids to have empathy and help others. So, for example, you could say something as simple as, ‘Let's make a wish that all of the people in Washington, D.C., that were hurt yesterday are going to be okay.’ If you are religious you can incorporate that into your prayer ritual,” Germán said.

This can also be a chance for them to get involved in letter writer or volunteering with a social justice movement. Even teens under 18 can call their elected officials.

“Is there an opportunity for action? Yes,” Gilboa said. “There's definitely an opportunity here to say, Who did you see yesterday behaving admirably? And who did you see yesterday behaving badly? Which legislators? Let's tell them.” 📡

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