

Using ERP Reflective Language and Relationship Based Practice Principles to Address Post-Election Anxiety In Young Children

by Lesley Koplow

Since Election Day, we have heard many stories of things that young children have said and done in the classroom, as they try to make emotional sense of what they have heard and seen during and after the presidential election. While schools may try to avoid the topic for fear of being perceived as partisan, classrooms that don't address children's fears and anxieties may find themselves trying to manage children who are more emotionally fragile, physically driven, distracted, preoccupied and socially disruptive or aggressive. When young children don't have a voice for what is worrying them, their worries erupt in ways that make classroom life very difficult. If adults in school can't talk about what is happening for children, then young children are left alone with their own fears and perceptions. They are left to take in the adult confusion and in some cases, despair that surrounded many families in the days after the election.

Here are a few of the situations that have come to our attention since Election Day.

- A 4 year old African American boy bursts into tears at rest time and tells his teacher, "Donald Trump doesn't like black people so he might tell the principal to arrest me".
- A kindergartener who is in line for lunch, holding hands with her best friend says solemnly, "Tomorrow I can't be your partner because the president is sending my family back to Mexico."
- A first grader who has been too distracted to finish his work shrugs when his teacher asks him why he hasn't done it. He then explains, "Why should I? My mom says this country is stupid. We might move to Canada, and then I might have to be in first grade all over again."

- A kindergartener approaches his Hispanic teacher with his hand positioned in the shape of a gun. When his teacher asks him what he is doing, he replies, “I can shoot you if you don’t leave our country.” His teacher lets him know that he cannot shoot her, and that it is OK for her to be in the U.S. He replies, “Yes, I can. Because the president said so.”
- A second grader is standing off to the side during outdoor playtime. When the teacher inquires why she is not engaged in play with other children, she confides quietly, “We voted for Trump and if my friends find out they might not want to play with me any more.”

Young children are deeply attuned to the emotional status of the adults around them. They know if parents, teachers or other important adults are upset or anxious. They hear everything that adults say to one another while they are in earshot. They remember images from the news, pre-election commercials and rhetoric. They take in and remember what is emotionally powerful, but don’t have the tools to make sense of what they are taking in. When children take in more than they can make sense of emotionally and cognitively, they feel anxious, overwhelmed and vulnerable. When your way of understanding time consists of “yesterday, today and tomorrow,” change feels threatening and threat feels imminent. Therefore, our immediate mission is to help children feel safer in the here and now, while they are with us in the classroom.

Teachers who feel derailed themselves in the wake of the election may wonder how to help children feel safer if they themselves aren’t feeling safe. It can help to remember that the most powerful protective factors for young children are the nurturing relationships they have with familiar adults. Children live in the microcosm of their families, schools and communities, and the supportive relationships that they have within those settings have the power to buffer children from the bigger world’s status. In times like this, we need to be very present as a force of comfort and reason in the daily lives of our children. In the lives of children, we are more powerful than we may feel.

Let's return to the stories from the classroom that have come our way recently. This time, we will elaborate and have a responsive teacher present for each child in the story.

A four year old African American boy bursts into tears at rest time and says, "Donald Trump doesn't like black people so he might tell the principal to arrest me".

T- Come here and sit with me. You sound so sad and so scared!

Boy- Nods, sniffing, "My cousin said so. He goes to a different class"

T- "Your cousin said so? Maybe your cousin doesn't know our principal. He's a pretty nice principal, and even though sometimes he talks to kids about their behavior, principals don't arrest kids. "

Boy- "They don't?" Teacher shakes her head.

T- After naptime, would you like to tell me the words to write in a letter to Donald Trump? I will tell him that in our school, we keep all children safe and we know that people of all colors are important. Then *you* can tell him what you would like him to know.

Boy nods, feels comforted and allows himself to return to his cot and cuddles his blanket.

A kindergartener who is on line for lunch, holding hands with her best friend says solemnly, "Tomorrow I can't be your partner because the president is sending my family back to Mexico."

T- It sounds like you are worried that you might be sent back to Mexico right away!

Girl- (Nods.) "Tomorrow."

T- Did you hear someone say that?"

Girl- Donald Trump said it on TV at my abuela's house.

T-Oh. I heard him say that too a lot of weeks ago, but did you know that President Obama is still our president for 2 more months!

Girl and her friend look very surprised. "Really?"

T- Yes. And even when Donald Trump becomes president, he would have to change the laws in order to send anyone back to the country that they came from. Lawmakers would have to vote about it, and some might not like that idea.

Girl's Friend. "And maybe he'll even change his mind! Anyway, you can still be my lunch partner tomorrow!" Both girls swing hands and giggle.

A first grader who has been too distracted to finish his work shrugs when his teacher asks him why he hasn't done it. He then explains, "Why should I? My mom says this country is stupid. We might move to Canada, and then I might have to be in first grade all over again."

T- **What do you think about the idea of moving to Canada?**

Boy- Its stupid.

T- **What makes it stupid?**

Boy- I told you! I'd have to be in the first grade all over again!

T- **Are there other things that make it stupid?**

Boy- I wouldn't be able to play in the West Side Little League, and I wouldn't even know anyone there.

T- **Sounds like you have a lot of good reasons for not wanting to move.**

Boy- I have like a hundred.

T- **OK. Instead of doing the work you were having trouble focusing on, would you rather make a list of the 100 reasons?**

Boy- Now?

T- **Sure. You can start right now! I think I would feel pretty angry if someone told me I had to move to a new place, and I think you might have some pretty good reasons!**

A five year old approaches his Hispanic kindergarten teacher with his hand positioned in the shape of a gun. When his teacher asks him what he is doing, he replies, "I can shoot you if you don't leave our country." His teacher lets him know that he cannot shoot her, and that it is OK for her to be in the U.S. He replies, "Yes, I can. Because the president said so."

T-**Oh! You are thinking that if we have a new president, the rules at school will change!**

Boy- They will!

T- **Well, some laws may change in our country after a while, but our school rules about not hurting anyone, and our feelings about welcoming all kinds of people from all different places will not change.**

Boy- Well, my dad says they will.

T- Well, moms and dads are in charge at home, but in school, teachers and principals are in charge.

The boy shrugged and sat down on the rug.

A second grader is standing off to the side during outdoor playtime, looking dejected. When the teacher inquires why she is not engaged in play with other children, she confides quietly, “We voted for Trump and if my friends find out they might not want to play with me any more.”

T- You look really sad and worried about that.

Girl- (Nods). Because all my friends’ parents voted for Hillary!

T- So, you are thinking that if your family made a different choice, your friends wouldn’t want you to be their friend anymore?

Girl-(whispers) Their parents might not let them.

T- I see. I know that there are at least a few other families whose parents voted differently. I am thinking how we have always looked at accepting differences within our classroom and within our school community. How about if I bring up the election in social studies, and I ask about how we make sure that families who voted differently still feel accepted?

Girl- (Looks relieved). But we don’t have to tell, right?

T- Nope. Only if you want to.

In these examples, teachers make sure that the children are not alone with their feelings and worries. Teacher responses consisted of empathic verbal reflections of what children were expressing, a few clarifying questions, and a few clarifying statements. The questions that were asked were only to help the teacher understand what the child had seen or heard. The clarifying statements were informed by an understanding of the developmental level of the children involved. Some teachers took another step, and integrated the children’s concerns into curriculum, helping them use literacy and social studies to integrate their life experiences and communicate them to others. In all of these examples, all children had a partner in the teacher. Each teacher was able to help the child feel protected within this partnership. No child was left alone with “big world” issues. Each teacher used the power of relationship to bring relief to a child in her care. When anxiety is relieved, exploration and learning can happen.