

Politics Come to School: Using ERP's Reflective Language and Relationship Based Practice Principles to Address Reactive Anxiety In Young Children

by Lesley Koplow

Politics Come to School

Since the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States, political realities have been changing at a pace unprecedented in recent history. Teachers, school leaders and school social workers have the challenging mission of interacting with young children who may feel a threat to their own well being or the well being of their families as they hear and see the news, listen to adults talking over them, or read newspaper headlines on the subway on their way to school.

Even children who are too young to notice the newspaper react to changes in parental mood and affect, and read the faces of their parents for signs of alarm or reassurance in tumultuous times. While adults often believe that young children are protected from difficult realities because they can't fully comprehend what is happening, children have radar for adult's emotional states. They tune in to all intense emotions expressed by adults around them, particular if those adults are in positions of authority. Seeing our leaders yelling, looking accusatory or hostile and hearing them voice negativity about others can be confusing and overwhelming to young children, even if they are not identified with the targets of the verbal attacks.

Young children absorb societal anxiety readily, and require adult relationship partners who can buffer the effects of hostile winds. This is true for children both at home and in school. Indeed, young children who feel threatened and unprotected in a group setting, often behave in threatening ways themselves, using preemptive aggression as a self-protective measure. When children don't feel safe in school, it is almost impossible for them to attend or to fully engage in their learning.

In recent weeks, teachers have reported hearing some disturbing comments from children in their pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first, second and third grade classrooms in reaction to the political surround. The following sample of things that children have said to teachers will give the reader a sense of what young children and their teachers are trying to cope with since the 2017 inauguration:

- A hispanic 7 year old whose family crossed the border illegally seeking safety, is building in the block area. He explains, "I am building a fort, because I don't want the president to find me and send me back to danger in my country."
- A six year old African American child raises her hand, in response to a question about current events. When the teacher calls on her, she comments, "The president wants to send us back to Africa, and turn us into slaves again."
- A five year old boy whose family lives in Trump Towers begins to scream when it is time to go home at the end of each day. His twin sister sits in her cubby nearby, all ready to leave. When the teacher inquires about the little boy's sudden difficulties at good-bye time, the twin's parents explain that their son has become terrified by the protestors that have become a frequent presence outside his window, and is convinced that the the guns carried by the secret services will be used to kill his neighbors.

These examples of children's reactions to what they are hearing and seeing communicate the feeling of vulnerability that has invaded many of the children and families in our city's schools. Parents may share their feelings of distress, but may not know how to interpret disturbing events in ways that provide comfort without denying the realities underlying their feelings and experiences. Teachers may feel that they need to keep their distance from policy issues in the classroom. They may feel conflicted, overwhelmed, enraged or confused themselves about what it

happening. Teachers may be inclined to quickly reassure children, but may not feel comfortable exploring where children's concerns are coming from, or realizing the actual threat that the administration's policy changes may be bringing to some of their students and their families within their communities.

Young children have become attached to their teachers by this time in the school year. They read their teachers facial expressions and body language to judge the teacher's receptivity to the issues that they bring to school. If children feel that they cannot express their worries because the teacher would not be able to hear them, or, because parents have advised them to be silent, or because the principal or other authorities would judge them harshly, they may be less likely to express their concerns. In this situation, children may be more likely to become preoccupied, distracted and vulnerable to seemingly random emotional outbursts during the school day.

To ensure that children are fully present in the classroom, it is important that teachers and school leaders develop the capacity to be responsive when children "bring politics" to school. It is crucial that teachers become knowledgeable about the issues that may be impacting children and families within their school communities, no matter where their own political affiliations lie. Otherwise, children may feel alone with their worries while they are in the classroom, and may struggle to be engaged or contain their anxiety.

Lets return to the children's comments recorded earlier, using ERP's reflective language and expressive invitations to demonstrate possible teacher responses.

Child: "I am building a fort, because I don't want the president to find me and send me back to my country."

Teacher: "It sounds like you wish you could hide so that you don't get sent back to El Salvador." (reflective comment)

Child: Nods. "I wish I could build a very giant fort to hide my whole fami-

ly from ICE, because they might take us away and leave us in danger in my country!"

Teacher: "It sounds like you have heard grown ups talking about what is happening with ICE. I am so glad that our chancellor and our mayor will not let ICE come into schools! We want all of our children to feel safe in school!" (reflective comment and reassuring comment, based on city policy)

Child: Shrugs. "But they might come at my Papi's work. That's what my abuela said. She said "Stay home, hijo!"

Teacher nods. "What do you think?" (invitation to say more, hear child's point of view)

Child: "I think my Papi has to go to work. He has to buy food."

Teacher nods. "It sounds like you will need all of the big blocks in our classroom, to make your fort very, very strong, so your whole family could be inside! Would you like some more blocks?" (nod affirming child's reality, comment acknowledging child's symbolic solution to the problem)

Child: Smiles. "Yes! I will make it so strong like superman!"

* * * * *

A six year old African American child raises her hand in response to an inquiry about current events. When the teacher calls on her, she says, "Teacher, the president wants to send us back to Africa, and turn us into slaves again!"

Teacher: "Did you hear somebody say that? (Clarifying question)

Child: "Yes. My auntie. She said the president don't like brown people."

Several children nod and call out in agreement.

Teacher: "It sounds like some other children have heard that too." (Reflective comment)

Children express agreement. The first little girl looks up at her teacher expectantly.

Teacher: "Is that why you think the president might send your family back to Africa and make you a slave again?"

Child nods. "And also my best auntie is Muslim."

Teacher: "I see. Maybe you also heard something about the president's feeling about Muslims." (Reflective comment)

Various other children chime in about relatives or people they know who are

Muslim, the president wanting to send Muslims away, ban them, etc.)

Teacher: Even if the president doesn't like brown people, and doesn't like Muslim people, he can't send your family back to Africa and can't make you slaves again." (Clarifying comment)

Child: "Why?"

Teacher: "Because that would be against the law. You and your family are American citizens. America is your country, and you have the right to be here. I am so glad that you **are** here! In our school, we know that brown people are important, and people of all religions are welcome." (Clarifying comment and affirmation of children's worth within the school community.)

Child: Looks relieved. "Good! Then I can go to the Y camp in the summer with my big cousin!"

Teacher smiles. "That sounds like someplace you really want to go! You know what? If any of you start to feel worried again you can write a letter to the president, to let him know what you and some of the other children are feeling." (Invitation for self expression)

Child: "Well, I am still a little worried....".

Teacher: If you want to write a letter, go get some paper. If it is hard to write all of the words, you can tell them to me and I can write them down for you."

Child nods. A few children go off in search of paper.

* * * * *

A five year old whose family lives in Trump Towers screams when it is time to go home at the end of the day. When the teacher inquires about changes at home, his parents explain that he is terrified by the protestors that have become a frequent presence outside his window, and is convinced that the the guns carried by the secret service will be used to kill his neighbors.

Child: Whimpering near his cubby as the time to leave gets closer. The whimpering has been the beginning of the daily screaming episode.

Teacher approaches: "Mom says your building has been so scary for you because of the protestors and the secret service." (Reflective comment.)

Child looks up and nods. "They have guns."

Teacher: "I heard about that. Mom says the guns are to guard the building and keep everyone safe who lives there." (Clarifying comment.)

Child: Silent for a moment. "But they can make you dead! My sister's friend in 12-A said they might arrest her because she speaks Spanish at her grandma's house!"

Teacher: "That sounds really scary to think about. You have a lot of worries about you and your neighbors being safe at home these days." (Reflective comment.)

Child nods in agreement. "All the people are yelling outside. They might break the door down!"

Teacher: "I think the doorman will protect the door, but every day at good bye time you are so upset and worried about what's going on in your building! How about if we talk to Mom and we call Ms. B, our school social worker, to see if you can have some special play time with her? She is really good at helping kids to feel safer." (Reassuring comment, connection to resources)

Child nods, but is still looking distraught as he eyes the parents and babysitters who are arriving to pick up children. He moves toward his twin sister, but she is trying to tie her shoelace and pushes him away.

Teacher: "While you are waiting, would you like to draw a picture about the things that are going on in your building these days? You can ask your sister to join you if you like when she's done." (Invitation for self expression)

Child: "Yes!", he says with some relief. "Can I have 100 crayons?"

Using Reflective Language to Support Young Children

The teacher responses shown above have distinctive components. Initial responses may include attempts to get more information about the context of what the child is expressing, but then proceed to reflect the child's concerns and affects empathically. This helps the children feel that their teacher is present, and that they can partner with her around their worries.

When children expand on their issues, the teacher provides clarification if children are confused about what they have seen and heard. The teacher does not deny the essence of the children's emotional or actual experience. Teachers do offer reframing and reassurance in response to children's fears if they are based on erroneous conclusions. They also support children by communicating the belief that all children are welcome and valuable, as

well as stating their commitment to keeping all children safe at school.

Finally, the teachers offer children invitations to express their fears through other representational avenues, allowing children to feel more masterful and less vulnerable by using play, writing and drawing to further articulate and integrate experiences and develop symbolic solutions.

Once children play, build, write and draw, emotionally responsive teachers offer children a “good mirror” for their efforts, and express the value of the children’s work. Part of what teachers are communicating, consciously or unconsciously, is that our country is a democracy, and in a democracy, everyone has the right to a voice. Young children are just learning how to give voice to their feelings, thoughts and concerns as citizens of the classroom and of the school community. This learning can become an important part of the literacy, art and social studies curriculum in early childhood and early grade classrooms.

Creating a Holding Environment in Tumultuous Times: The Crucial Role of School Leaders

In response to the current administration’s recent policy changes impacting our immigrant communities, the Schools Chancellor and the Mayor of New York City sent a letter to all public school parents. The letter assured parents that undocumented children have the right to attend school, and that ICE would not be allowed to come into schools and remove children or parents. The letter made it clear that the city schools value their diverse population and would do everything in their power to support them, regardless of immigration status. The letter offered information about other city resources that could be accessed by families who need assistance.

This intervention was important for many reasons. It clarified that there are indeed laws allowing undocumented children to be

enrolled in school in the U.S., and therefore, parents need not be afraid to send their children to school. In addition, the letter expressed the city's commitment to the diverse community of children it serves, letting children and parents hear an authoritative voice that is different than the negative voices of authority that may be coming to them on the evening news. Since young children live within the small world of their families and communities, voices of support coming from within their own communities are powerful, and can help to buffer unhealthy messages coming from outside.

Within school communities, school leaders have a crucial role to play during challenging times. While families who attend school may include both democrats and republicans, and the teaching staff may be politically diverse as well, it is incumbent on school leaders to articulate the **school's** commitment to **all** of the children and families that make up the school community. Leaders need to communicate the expectation to everyone who works in the school building to be clear that **all** of the children are welcome, belong, and contribute something valuable to the school community. School leaders can do this in multiple ways. They can send letters home to families articulating the school's commitment to **all** of its students, have discussions in staff meetings about working in a culturally diverse environment in divisive times, include commitment to diversity as part of everyday communication, organize community dinners, murals and other inclusive projects, and frequently remind staff and children that **all children are precious at school**.

Leaders can also take care to nurture positive relationships that develop between teachers and vulnerable children and parents during politically stressful times. They can work to maintain continuity of relationships within the school community by encouraging looping, avoiding mid-year changes in placement, and maintaining continuity of staffing for out of classroom routines such as lunch and outdoor play where children who feel threatened are the most vulnerable. Since close relationships with at-

tached adults can buffer adversity for young children, strong teacher–child relationships are a valuable tool in times of stress, and can help children feel that they can be fully present at school since there are adults who know them well and can help them hold their anxieties.

Supporting teachers to become familiar with ERP’s reflective language and inviting and containing techniques may increase teachers’ comfort level in responding when politics come to school. When school leaders help diverse groups of children, parents and teachers feel highly valued, they increase the likelihood that school community members will value one another, and come together to support each other in trying times.

When school leaders, teachers and support staff can partner with children in order to help them hold confusing and anxiety– provoking political reality, the school experience becomes a protective factor for vulnerable students in the building. School leaders and teachers who do this are creating a “holding environment,” or emotional sanctuary for children and families who feel a threat in the political surround. If vulnerable children can feel safe in school, they experience less stress for many hours a day, become more socially connected, more attentive and more fully engaged in their own learning. As ERP’s Safe and Sound Schools know, feeling safe changes everything.