Helping Your Child Cope with Fears Related to Recent Political Changes
By: Gabriela Nordeman for EDUCA News March 2017

The recent shift in our political climate has resulted in many changes, including changes within the school setting. The Southern Poverty Law Center, an agency that combats intolerance and discrimination through education, sent a survey to 10,000 teachers and administrators to evaluate these changes. Of those 10,000 respondents, 80% reported observing an increase in anxiety and fear in their students (2).

Children and families are confronted daily by political and social changes, which likely contribute to this growing climate of anxiety. This is particularly true for Latin@ and other minority populations. Our children may fear the deportation of family, friends, or themselves; they may fear being separated from their families (adoptions, incarceration); they may fear police or other authority figures; they may fear being targeted by bullies; and the list goes on. Anxiety can be defined as feelings of fear/worry, nervousness, or unease about a situation or event, that causes distress and interfere with functioning. (1). Anxiety can manifest in many ways and may present as: feelings of panic or fear, restlessness, shortness of breath, changes in sleep patterns, cold or sweaty hands, heart palpitations, headaches, nausea, muscle tension, changes in appetite, difficulties concentrating, and/or dizziness (1). Did you know that anxiety can impact academic performance, emotional stability and overall wellbeing?

So, what can we—educators, families, community members, fellow students—do to help our students cope with this anxiety and improve the school environment in light of these recent negative impacts?

One of the most important things we can do for children is to provide a safe space, allowing them to communicate their fears. Talk with your children openly and honestly about how your family may be impacted by these political changes—consider drawing pictures, telling stories, or reading books to support these conversations. For those who face more imminent and tangible threats to safety—sit with your family and create a plan! Make a list, including numbers and addresses of important people (i.e. family members, friends, lawyers, etc.), along with safe places that you can turn to (such as a nearby sanctuary, school, or church). Seeking professional help—psychologists, therapists, school counselors—can have a huge impact on emotional stability. Consider joining or creating a group for children, so that they know they are not alone.

Drastic changes often lead to increased media coverage that may result in inaccurate information. Misinformation can increase anxiety. That is why staying up-to-date and informed of the law is so important. Increasing your knowledge can increase your sense of security and stability. There are several clinics and non-profit agencies that provide free and low-cost legal advice and information (resources available at http://www.du.edu/gspp/programs/latino/radio.html).

The fear that our children are experiencing is real. However, let us not see it as a weakness, but rather as an opportunity to further strengthen our communities and our country. By supporting and encouraging our students, we can help turn their anxiety and fear into resilience and empowerment.

Resources