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Children's Nation

by: Gwenn Kudler Gelfand, L.C.S.W.

It is no secret that our country is going through tremendous change and upheaval. The election of President Donald Trump has affected the lives of all Americans whether they supported him or not. We are seeing an increase in anxiety, fear and uncertainty that can have a significant impact on the lives of our children.

The division of opinions and positions in our country right now has left a deeply divided nation. Kids are overhearing their parents' conversations, newscasts, and their schools talk about many issues such as health care changes, immigration deportations, and the loss of jobs. They are absorbing their parents' and peers'

opinions but don't always have the knowledge, comprehension or maturity to form their own views. Kids are overhearing harmful or hurtful language. They see adults in intense disagreement with one another. They see our society routinely described as falling apart or in decline. We can't shield our children from this. Many children attended the recent women's marches. At no other time in our history have children been so politically involved and exposed.

In these circumstances one worries that formerly happy-go-lucky children may become fearful and anxious ones. The uncertainty of our country leaves tremendous uncertainty in their lives as well.

In some cases they are worried about their parents' lives and welfare which, in turn, will affect theirs. New immigration laws have not just affected the population the President is trying to remove. Immigrant children aren't the only ones affected. Many American kids are dealing with this issue indirectly. Private schools often have scholarship students, some of whom may be immigrants, and this is bringing these global issues directly into the classroom. I know this because in my practice I see children struggling with concerns and worry about "what will happen to my friend." Some may be fearful about the deportation and/or separation from nannies

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and housekeepers who have made a significant impact on their lives and are often primary caretakers. This significantly impacts the children they are caring for who have concerns about their caretakers and often about their own safety, security and care if they were to leave. In fact, this is among the most fearful group of young people I have seen in many years.

In addition, increases in bullying about ethnicity and country of origin affect both the victims and those who observe it. In the recent past as well, LGBTQ youngsters may have been feeling a sense of acceptance and encouragement to be the people that they are. At the present time, this may have changed. Where there may have been an increase in tolerance and acceptance of others seen in schools and camps across the country, this may be threatened if there are attitudes of intolerance and non-acceptance. I see youngsters struggling with their own sexual identity in this time of turmoil, as well as concerns about "my gay cousin" or "my gay friend" and what will happen to them.

As is always the focus here, what are the implications of these developments for camps? Camps can play a healing role in the lives of many children. Camps are a safe place that can foster the unity and togetherness that kids need especially in times when our country is polarized and divided. We need to foster an environment of acceptance and tolerance of others, the ability to share our thoughts and opinions while respecting and accepting differences. Team building activities and an increase in camp spirit is recommended to help kids gain a sense of belonging.

Counselors and camp staff need training in understanding the emotional state of many campers. What we may see is an increase in anxiety and depression among the camp population which can manifest itself in changes in sleeping, eating, participating in and enjoying previously pleasurable activities. Staff should be alert for an increase in bullying as kids may follow the nation's polarization and what they hear at home. This sword cuts both ways politically. Staff may hear "Trump lover" used disparagingly as readily as they may overhear ethnic slurs. The sense of safety in our children's environment is not a partisan or political issue.

This summer more than ever camps may be called to play a significant role in the lives of our youth. Camps are places that can let kids be kids in a world where they are often forced to grow up too quickly. Keen awareness and sensitivity is critical for staff and counselors as we continue to monitor and address the uncertainty.



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