

# Supporting the school community during the current conflict in the Middle East

## Our values, expertise, and commitment

The core values of NSW public schools guide our response in times of crises and underpin our pursuit of equity, excellence, and a caring, civil and just society. Wars and international conflicts, such as the current conflict in the Middle East, heighten people's sense of insecurity and evoke a range of emotions. The expertise, compassion and dedication of our school leaders and teachers are integral to helping students and their families successfully navigate these uncertain times and ensure that our schools remain safe and supportive environments for all students, staff and community.

## Who might be impacted by the current conflict in Gaza?

It is important to remember that the distress and impact of this conflict will not be limited to individuals with direct connection to the crisis but may be felt by others as well. This may include:

- students and families with Palestinian, Israeli, or Middle Eastern heritage
- students and families of the Jewish and/or Muslim faiths
- students and families who have experienced similar violence
- students with family members attempting to return home to Australia
- students, staff and community who are concerned about the broader implications of the crisis.

## How might the impact of the current conflict manifest in the school environment?

Differing opinions about the causes of the conflict, personal concerns about safety and injustice, and fears about physical or verbal repercussions can engender strong emotional reactions among staff, students, and the community. This can have a significant impact on the school environment. These emotions and how they are expressed vary from individual to individual and can change as the crisis unfolds and escalates. This may include:

- increased sensitivity to issues of justice, freedom and identity
- anxiety associated with a sense of loss of security and safety

- distress due to frequent graphic or uncensored images in the media or social media
- re-emergence of previous trauma
- helplessness and grief
- inability to concentrate and/or complete schoolwork
- increased absenteeism and a decline in engagement
- fear of physical and/or verbal assault
- behaviour changes such as withdrawal, sadness and/or acting out
- conflict with or harassment of peers
- use of national symbols and/or colours to show support and solidarity
- increase in the display of racist behaviour or religious intolerance
- headaches and general body pains.

## What can schools do?

Schools play a critical role in maintaining connection and engagement with students and their families during periods of community unrest and uncertainty. Schools should consider how the current conflict may impact the local school environment and work with the community to plan and implement appropriate supports. It is important that staff do not make assumptions about how individuals and/or groups will react to the current conflict.

Below are some suggestions for actions which may assist.

### School leaders

- Ensure that all school communications and actions reflect a neutral position in relation to the conflict and remind staff of their obligation to demonstrate neutrality through the delivery of their work and when speaking to students, families and other staff members.
- Consult staff with relevant expertise in wellbeing, trauma informed practice, and multicultural education to determine how to best engage with the community and support students and their families.
- Convene a staff meeting to provide contextual information and discuss a planned school response to the impact of the conflict on the school community. This may include:
  - acknowledging that some students and/or staff may feel distressed, anxious and upset
  - the counsellor providing information about how the conflict may impact students, staff and community members and how to monitor and respond to behaviour changes
  - how to respond to students' questions and comments in a consistent and balanced manner

- how to respond to students' behaviour that may be insensitive, racist, discriminatory or of a harassing nature.
- Refer to the Controversial Issues in Schools policy and procedures and ensure that, where appropriate, parents or carers are notified of the participation of students in the delivery of curriculum, school programs and activities, presentations or other events that address controversial issues. Principals provide the option for parents or carers to withdraw their child from activities addressing controversial issues where appropriate in accordance with their professional judgement.
- Reflect on the school's general response to students' expression of cultural identity and connections to countries overseas and consider whether the school's response to students' expression of support or connection with Palestine or Israel is the same or different to responses at other times or during other conflicts. Consistent responses regarding like or similar student behaviours are important in demonstrating neutrality and fairness.
- Develop, in collaboration with families and/or the community, a consistent and considerate approach to address students who are expressing their feelings through an outward display of national symbols and/or colours.
- Communicate sensitively and clearly with families about school expectations and responses. Use qualified interpreters where needed to communicate with parents and carers who do not speak or understand English well. Qualified interpreters have a high level of fluency in English and community languages and are trained to communicate messages accurately and impartially. Schools may use [onsite](#) or [online](#) interpreters or [telephone interpreting](#) services to communicate with parents and carers. These costs are generally met by the department and do not have to be funded by the school. See the Department of Education's [interpreting and translations](#) website for more information.
- Seek feedback from the Community Liaison Officer, Community Engagement Officer, or School Learning Support Officer and include their voice in your approach to working with families and local community groups.
- Consider organising Year or Stage meetings, where appropriate, to acknowledge the conflict and the feelings people may be having. This is an opportunity to remind students of the wellbeing support available, the school values and that racism and discrimination against others is not acceptable in the school community. Remind students that reports of racism, religious bullying and other forms of discrimination can be made to any member of staff.
- Send a note home with students and/or post a message on the school website and social network platforms outlining the school's response to the crisis and the support available for students. A general letter regarding steps taken to support students in response to stressful community events is available in translation: [Letter to parents regarding recent community events](#).
- Utilise established processes so that affected students have a safe place to go if they need some time away from the classroom and/or peers.

- Consult with the Director, Educational Leadership, if significant problems arise in your school concerning the management of these issues.

## Teachers

- Maintain routines and predictability. This will help students feel safe.
- Use caution when discussing the conflict in the staffroom or where you may be overheard by students. Students may misconstrue what they hear and fill in the blanks with inaccuracies which may increase their distress.
- Check that instructions in class or in the playground are understood by students. Additional clarification may be necessary because some students may be distracted.
- Be understanding and flexible with the completion of homework and assignments for affected students.
- Consider the topics that the students are currently studying in their subjects. Some topics that reference war, violence, and human rights violations can be particularly triggering. Consider the age and stage of learning of students when planning and adapt the discussion as needed. It is important to consider how to sensitively present these topics if they are part of the mandatory curriculum or scoped sequence of learning. Consideration should be given to selecting alternative examples or options where it is possible and appropriate. Students may need to be given the option for alternative work to complete.
- Refer to the Controversial Issues in Schools policy and procedures. and ensure the exploration of controversial issues in schools allows students to explore a range of viewpoints and does not advance the interest of any particular group. Ensure that the material presented to students as part of school programs and school activities are: age appropriate; sensitive to student needs; relevant to the curriculum; and relevant to the school's purpose and goals.
- Under the Controversial Issues in Schools policy, inform the principal about upcoming activities, curriculum content, school programs, presentations, events or visitors addressing controversial issues. The principal may then decide, where appropriate, to notify parents/carers.
- When discussing issues that may be controversial or sensitive, always use inclusive language to enable everyone to feel that they are being reflected and included in what is being said and learnt. Teaching and learning should focus on exploring the issue through the context of the syllabus whilst ensuring respectful and purposeful discussion. Ensure that discussions are clearly focused on the syllabus content and outcomes with guidance and structure from the teacher. Support students by providing a range of sources to examine varying perspectives to inform their understanding and opinions. Establish and model clear expectations and respectful discussion protocols consistently – a class agreement could be developed in consultation with students.

- Provide students opportunities to ask questions and express their feelings. Be impartial, answer factually and follow the school approach to ensure a consistency of response. The language and content used should be age appropriate. Tell the student that you will get back to them if the question is not easily answered.
- Reinforce the idea that schools and classrooms must be safe places which support students to express their cultural identity and differing worldviews respectfully and which require students to consider others' views and cultural expressions respectfully. Ensure the classroom and learning activities are culturally appropriate and safe for all students in the class.

## All staff

- Monitor students for signs of distress including sudden changes in behaviour, school attendance and/or participation and notify relevant staff. Notify the principal and counsellor if students show signs of extreme distress.
- Demonstrate neutrality at all times, especially when speaking to students, families and other staff members.
- Allow students and colleagues to control their level of disclosure. Remember, their worries and feelings may not be what you think. Validate the feelings that your students and colleagues may share.
- Remain as calm as possible when discussing the conflict and use language both young and older students can understand.
- Share observations and work together as a team to determine the best way to support students.
- Promptly address any reports of racism, discrimination and/or harassment that occur within the school to assure students, staff and the school community that the school is a safe place.
- Arrange, where possible, for appropriately trained staff, including the [Refugee Counselling Support Team](#) (1300 579 060), to support students and staff.
- When required, access or refer staff, students and community to the [Distressing content online](#) resource developed by the E-Safety Commissioner.
- Look after your own emotional wellbeing by talking with a friends or colleagues or contacting the [Employee Assistance Program](#) on 1800 060 650
- Promote, as required, the community supports available such as, [Kids Helpline](#) (1800 551 800), [Beyond Blue](#) (1300 224 636), [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14), [NSW Transcultural Mental Health Line](#) (1800 648 911).

## Support and resources

- The [Multicultural Education](#) team promotes anti-racism education, intercultural understanding and social inclusion in schools, and support for English language learners, refugees and newly arrived students.

[multicultural.programs@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:multicultural.programs@det.nsw.edu.au) or [antiracismeducation@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:antiracismeducation@det.nsw.edu.au)

- [Interpreting and translation services guidelines](#)
- [Supporting refugee students](#) webpages provide information about refugee students in schools and available support. Refugee Student Education Advisor: Ph (02) 7814 3796
- [Henry Parkes Equity Resource Centre](#) has a large collection of materials to support schools. These include resources for trauma, resilience and wellbeing including specialist counsellor resources. [EquityResourceLibrary@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:EquityResourceLibrary@det.nsw.edu.au) Ph: 8808 1177
- [STARTTS](#) provides culturally responsive psychological treatment to support people from refugee backgrounds rebuild their lives in Australia.
  - [STARTTS School Liaison program](#)
  - [STARTTS Witness to War hotline](#) 1800 845 198
- ABCs [Behind the News](#) has a number of episodes for upper primary and high school students. Please review resources before sharing to ensure they are suitable for your school context.
  - BTN – [Media Literacy Week](#)
  - BTN – [Rules of War](#)
  - BTN High – [How to spot misinformation and fake news online](#)
  - BTN – [Important things to remember about upsetting news](#)
- For suggested actions for school staff in response to student behaviour and to build resilience, see **page 20** of [Strengthening harmony and building resilience in school communities: Advice for schools](#).
- For suggested phrasing when having conversations with students, see **page 22** of [Strengthening harmony and building resilience in school communities: Advice for schools](#).

## References

Emerging Minds (2023). **Fact sheet: How to talk to children about war and conflict.** National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health.

Emerging Minds (2023). **Talking to children about terrorism and violent events.** National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health.

Foundation House (2023). **Tip sheet: Supporting children, young people and their families during and international crisis.** The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

NSW Department of Education (2023). [Strengthening harmony and building resilience in school communities: Advice for schools.](#)

NSW Department of Education (2023). [Support in times of crises.](#)

STARTTS (2023) [Briefing sheet for educators in NSW: Supporting students impacted by the 2023 Israel-Hamas War.](#) NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d). **Talking to children about war.**

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