

# Supporting the school community during the current conflict in the Middle East: Advice for schools

## 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 distressing and uncertain times and ensure that our schools remain safe and supportive environments for everyone.

## Who might be impacted by the current conflict in the Middle East?

The conflict can have a significant impact on members of the school community. 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, staff and families:

- with Palestinian, Israeli, Lebanese or Middle Eastern heritage
- of Jewish, Muslim and/or other faiths
- who have experienced similar violence
- with family members in affected areas of conflict
- who are concerned about the broader implications of the crisis.

## The impact of the current conflict in schools

The impact of the conflict and individuals' responses will vary and can change as the conflict unfolds. School communities may also be impacted by a potential increase in racism or religious intolerance with the wider society. School leaders and other staff should demonstrate empathy and understanding to help maintain a safe and supportive learning and working environment.

Responses may include:

- heightened sensitivity to issues of justice, freedom and equity

- anxiety, fear and grief
- distress due to frequent graphic or uncensored images in the media or social media
- re-emergence of previous trauma
- behaviour changes such as withdrawal or acting out
- conflict with peers
- headaches and general body pains
- survivor guilt and helplessness
- anger and resentment due to social and political factors associated with the current conflict
- feeling that their concerns are not being acknowledged or understood by the wider community.

These responses may have a significant impact on students' learning and wellbeing, with some students disengaging from learning, struggling to complete schoolwork, withdrawing, or exhibiting challenging behaviours. To cope and show solidarity students may also display national symbols and/or colours.

## What can schools do?

Schools play a critical role in maintaining connection and engagement with students and their families during periods of community distress 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.

Schools' reactions to students' responses should be considered carefully to avoid heightening anxiety or distress in the school community while simultaneously enabling the safe expression of cultural identity and an environment of cultural safety and wellbeing for everyone.

Maintaining objectivity in relation to controversial and complex issues is critical for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all students and in fostering harmony within the broader school community. See [Maintaining objectivity in the learning environment](#) for further guidance.

Below are some suggestions for actions which may assist.

## School leaders

- Consult staff with 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:

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- acknowledging that some students and/or staff may feel distressed, anxious and upset
  - school counselling staff 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.
- Ensure that all school communications, school practices and procedures demonstrate objectivity.
  - Work with school counselling staff to provide students with opportunities to ask questions and express their feelings. Provide an objective and empathetic school approach to ensure a consistency of response. The language and content used should be age appropriate.
  - 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: [Middle East letter to parents](#).
  - 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.
  - 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.
  - Ensure the school's response to students' expression of cultural identity and connections to other countries is culturally responsive and consistent with the department's [Wellbeing Framework for Schools](#).
  - Where possible, 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 have. This is not a forum for group discussions rather 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.

- 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 to 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 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 students are currently studying. 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.
- Refer to the [Controversial issues in schools policy](#) and [procedures](#) to ensure the study 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.
- Inform the principal about upcoming classroom activities, curriculum content, school programs, extra-curricular activities, student-organised activities, presentations, events or visitors that may address controversial issues, or if such issues arise unexpectedly in line with the Controversial issues in schools policy. The principal may then decide, where appropriate, to notify parents/carers and seek guidance from their Director, Educational Leadership.
- When discussing issues that may be controversial or sensitive, always use inclusive language to allow everyone to feel they are 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.

- If students ask questions or express their feelings, be objective, empathetic, 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 their 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. Ensure classroom and learning activities are culturally responsive 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 school counselling staff if students show signs of extreme distress.
- Be objective and empathetic, especially when speaking to students, families and other staff members.
- Remind students and colleagues to consider their level of disclosure in all settings. 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.

## 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)
- [Maintaining objectivity in the learning environment](#)
- [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
- [Refugee Student Counselling Support Team](#) (1300 579 060) provides advice and consultation, complex case support, group programs, capacity building of staff, referrals to other services and resources.
- [Distressing content online](#) resource developed by the E-Safety Commissioner.
- 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).
- [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.
  - [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.
- For suggested actions for school staff in response to student behaviour and to build resilience, see **page 17** of [Strengthening harmony and building resilience in school communities: Advice for schools](#).
- For suggested phrasing when having conversations with students, see **page 19** of [Strengthening harmony and building resilience in school communities: Advice for schools](#).
- Contact the [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP) for support on 1800 951 198.

## 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 education 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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