

Handling Sensitive Topics and Issues

Talking about social issues often involves addressing sensitive topics. We know that there are many different views about social issues and many different experiences. As such these conversations may evoke strong opinions or raise challenging questions about values and beliefs that have no easy answers.



What students learn in class may be different to what they hear and see from home and those around them. It is important to handle these issues without reinforcing stereotypes, increasing confusion or raising tension between students.

When talking about the issues, memories, histories and feelings associated with lived experiences of racism, homophobia, violence or other matters, it is important to create a safe and positive classroom environment which encourages participation and cooperation, without creating pressure on those who may not feel comfortable sharing their stories. Remember, just because there is a student in your class who may have lived experiences of a sensitive topic, it is not their responsibility to educate the rest of the class about it.

When using teaching and learning activities from this resource, be mindful of the different learning abilities, maturity levels and personal backgrounds of your students. Many of the issues, perspectives and language explored in this resource are not limited to experiences described in the lesson. It is important that teachers are aware of students within their class who may have direct or indirect experience with family trauma, violence, bullying, mental illness, individual or systemic experiences of discrimination and/or family/cultural dislocation.

In particular, efforts should be made to ensure that students feel that they are in a safe learning environment. One of the primary ways of doing this is by setting group rules by establishing a mutually agreed list of sharing guidelines, displaying them in a highly visible place, and encouraging the class to kindly remind each other of the guidelines. These guidelines could include:

- Own your ideas by using “I think” rather than “you should”.
- Respect each other by remembering that each person has their own beliefs and values and their own world views, experiences and opinions.
- Each person has a right to contribute their ideas so listen politely.
- Be brave in sharing your ideas, experiences and opinions.
- Consider the privacy of your classmates and appreciate that everyone has the right to uphold their privacy; this might mean they don't want to share their ideas or experiences on an issue.
- Share feedback in a way that is considerate and positive: remember to be kind, helpful and specific when providing feedback

By helping to create an environment where opinions and perspectives are respected, students are encouraged to actively take part in advancing respect for the rights of others, within the classroom and beyond. In the instance of issues relating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, students should always aim to work alongside a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

As a result of engaging with uncomfortable content, students may experience a range of emotions and reactions. It may be appropriate to share some coping mechanisms with them, such as: deep breathing, going for a walk, taking time out, journaling, drawing or listening to music.

In cases where students require counselling or support, refer them to assistance from the school counsellor or from one of the organisations listed below.

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is a counselling service for Australian children and young people aged between 5 and 25 years.

Website: <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/>

Phone: 1800 551 800

Headspace

The National Youth Mental Health Foundation provides information and advice for young people going through difficulties through their Headspace centres and online and telephone support services.

Website: <https://www.eheadspace.org.au/>

Phone: 1800 650 890

Beyond Blue Youth

Beyond Blue Youth has been established to provide information about anxiety, depression and suicide to young people in Australia aged 12–25.

Website: <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/home/>

Phone: 1300 22 4636

Lifeline

Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Website: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/Home>



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