

## How to Support Students during World Conflicts

### Getting Ready

We all come with certain biases and perspectives related to world events. It is important to remember that there are a wide range of identities and experiences in our schools and classrooms. Some students, staff and families may have a specific connection to events. Be aware of your own emotions, opinions, biases and beliefs so that these do not influence your response to students or other discussions that may arise in the classroom.

### Thinking of Students:

- Recognize that with evolving world events, facts can be elusive, and speculation and bias is common. Hold information lightly.
- Recognize that world events occurring at this time are happening on top of several years of pandemic disruption, instances of social injustice and harms, and disproportionate impacts on students and families who are most negatively impacted by the social determinants of health (e.g., poverty, racism, marginalization, limited access to health care).
- Consider each of the students in your class(es) and reflect on whether or not they might be particularly impacted by the world event based on your knowledge of the events.

### Thinking of You:

- Consider the impact of media coverage on your well-being and decide how much you need or want to take in at any given time.
- Acknowledge that conversations with students might be difficult for you, depending on your own proximity to the world event, or other personal circumstances.
- Consider the routines you have for taking care of yourself (physical, emotional, spiritual and throughout life). Give yourself permission to create more space for your own wellness needs during times of strain.
- Reflect on your emotional readiness to respond to questions students may have about challenging world events.
- Know your limits and ask for support as needed. Use a team approach with colleagues if that could be helpful.
- Ask for help. You do not have to face this experience alone. Help is available for you through your employee assistance program, or you may wish to consult with your family physician or contact a local helpline. Wellness Together Canada also offers supports that may be helpful.

## Reactions to Challenging World Events

- Fear/Excessive Worry
- Sadness/Withdrawal
- Anger/Irritability
- Shame/Guilt/Embarrassment

## Emotion Coaching

Emotion Coaching is a communication strategy, which can help to calm the brain and regulate emotions and behaviours. It involves two steps: 1) validation and 2) support.

Validation is an acknowledgement of another's experience, point of view, thoughts, emotions or behaviours. Validation requires us to set aside our perceptions while communicating our understanding of their experience. Validation is proving that you are trying to understand – but from their point of view, as if you were in their shoes.

### Validation Looks like:

- Honouring what a student is saying or expressing about their experience.
- Let students know that emotions are normal, expected and likely shared by others.
- Accept these emotions and allow students to express their feelings. Emphasize that people are entitled to their opinions unless it is hurtful to someone else.
- Respect a diversity of responses. Some students prefer to talk to adults like caregivers or educators while others will talk to peers.
- Being curious about a student's experience and how they are viewing the situation.

## Examples for Consideration:

**A primary student comes to you crying because older children told them that there was going to be a war. Using validation, an educator might say:**

*That sounds like very frightening talk. I can see that it has made you feel upset. It makes sense that you may be feeling scared... <identify emotion, urge, attitude, behaviour > because hearing talk of war makes you worried about your safety and because you wonder if bad things are going to happen here and because you don't like hearing about people fighting. <Pause and notice changes in student's verbal and non-verbal communication to determine if more validation is required before moving to support strategies>*

**A junior division student expresses worry about a news headline related to war. Using validation, an educator might say:**

*It makes sense that you are feeling worried... < identify emotion, urge, attitude, behavior > about that news headline because it is scary to think about the possibility of a war and because it makes you wonder if you and people you love are safe and because you are feeling sad for the people in harm's way. <Pause and notice changes in student's verbal and non-verbal communication to determine if more validation is required before moving to support strategies>*

**An intermediate student shows you a meme and series of videos that highlights some of the racist and discriminatory behaviour that has arisen in relation to a challenging world event, expressing their outrage and anger with what has been surfaced. Using validation, an educator might say:**

*I hear you. You are incredibly angry...< identify emotion, urge, attitude, behavior > about the injustices that are exposed on these social media pieces because it is another painful reminder of the discriminatory ways that people are treated based on their race, ethnicity, gender identity, disabilities, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and culture because it is relentless and because there don't seem to be any consequences for those perpetrating the harm. <Pause and notice changes in student's verbal and non-verbal communication to determine if more validation is required before moving to support strategies>*

**A secondary student notes that they had to flee a country and that the images of recent world events are bringing back terrible memories. Using validation, an educator might say:**

*I can see why those on-line images are so troubling for you because you are remembering the pain you and your family went through.....< identify emotion, urge, attitude, behavior > and because you were hoping that you were never going to have to think about those painful memories again <pause and check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait> and because you may be worried about your safety again. <Pause and notice changes in student's verbal and non-verbal communication to determine if more validation is required before moving to support strategies>*

## Support Strategies for Students

Offering support becomes much more helpful once the student has had a fulsome opportunity to fully express their emotions and have them heard and validated. If support is offered too early, the student will have difficulty taking in suggestions for support because they are still processing their feelings. Once sure that a student feels fully heard, an educator can offer suggestions for support.

- Consider how you have set up classroom norms for safety, e.g., how have you set up support to students? You can revisit the suggested classroom norms from [On the Horizon document](#).

- In some circumstances, reassurance may be welcome and valid. In others, when safety cannot be assured because of the proximity of the world event or for other reasons, it is best to instead focus on providing reassurance that they have caring adults in their lives who can help them each step of the way.
- Encourage students to draw on their natural supports, faith, self-care skills, and other sources of strength.
- There are many ways to manage feelings of worry and fear that can be helpful. For example, calm breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization, distraction,
- Consider if any sensitive curriculum content might need to be delayed or changed.
- Create quiet spaces for student reflection and dialogue within the classroom if possible.
- Have conversations about the impact of media coverage on well-being and encourage students to take breaks from the news and social media where appropriate.
- Remember that it is okay to not have all the answers about the events occurring. What is most important is that you acknowledge and validate the student's experience, rather than teaching, explaining, or using this as a learning opportunity.

Please see the [Emotion Coaching "Cheat Sheet" for Educators for Validating Tough Emotions](#)

## Responding to Discrimination and Harassment

- We all have a role to play in stopping discrimination and harassment
- In times of ongoing crisis, there is an increased risk for incidents of harassment and discrimination.
- Share the concerns raised by students with your Administrator paying particular attention to Human Rights policies and [safe school](#) reporting procedures.
- If you have concerns, please use the [Human Rights Concerns/Incidents Form](#) to make a report.

## Additional Supports

- Be mindful that there may be students without an obvious link or vulnerability who may experience difficulty.
- Watch for changes in student behaviour and/or emotions that are excessive in duration, intensity or interfering with day-to-day functioning.
- If you have concerns, consult with your school administrator and with the student's caregiver(s). Please see the [Caregiver Resources and Supports](#) document for caregivers to pursue support services.

*This resource includes content adapted from materials created by [School Mental Health Ontario](#) and [Emotion-Focused Family Therapy](#) by Adele Lafrance.*

*Find this and other resources for HWDSB staff at [hwsdbonca.sharepoint.com/sites/mentalhealth/](https://hwsdbonca.sharepoint.com/sites/mentalhealth/)*