

# MANAGING SENSITIVE CONTENT AND CONVERSATIONS IN CLASSROOMS



Foundation  
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The Victorian Foundation  
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## Strategies to support students of refugee backgrounds

Classroom teachers working in culturally and linguistically diverse school communities will be aware of the need for sensitivity and responsiveness when planning class activities and selecting appropriate resources. Supporting students of refugee backgrounds raises additional trauma-informed considerations to some curriculum content and activities which have the potential to bring to mind students' past traumatic refugee experiences.

This resource provides classroom teachers with strategies and approaches to manage sensitive content and conversations related to students' traumatic refugee experiences.

### GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- » Knowing your students and their cultural background allows teachers, support staff and school leaders to feel more comfortable and better prepared when a situation or discussion arises. This also creates an environment in which students feel their culture is valued.
- » Keeping up to date and informed with news about particular global events that affect your students will assist you to anticipate when conversations may arise or need to be planned.
- » By considering the psychological safety of the classroom environment and level of emotional maturity of students, determine the capacity of students to support each other and be sensitive to the needs of others.
- » Familiarise yourself with the multilayered levels of support that exist in your school or community in order to make prompt and appropriate referrals with consent.
- » School leadership should be considerate that students, staff and families may be impacted by home country conflicts and offer supports.
- » School leadership can also provide guidance for teachers or express solidarity with the affected community. This can also assist by giving staff confidence and skills to approach these questions with their classes and to check in with any individual students affected.





## MANAGING PLANNED ACTIVITIES AND CONVERSATIONS

### WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO:

- » Flag with affected students when you are going to cover sensitive topics such as war or human rights in class so that they can be prepared – offer alternate options for them if they would prefer not to participate.
- » Establish a group agreement when you are discussing sensitive issues in class, for example, turn-taking and confidentiality protocols.
- » Provide space for students to share their experiences if/when they want to. Never ‘out’ students in front of their peers or refer to them for examples of lived experience – allow them to voluntarily share of their own accord.
- » Use distancing activities (i.e. ‘How would your friend feel if they were going through this?’) so that students do not have to be vulnerable about their own experiences but can still contribute. Encourage staff to use open questions.
- » Teachers could also use a question box strategy where students can respond to content or activities in class in an anonymous, written form, allowing the teacher to appreciate the students’ thoughts and feelings and be ready to address themes that arise.
- » Ensure that you follow up with students who are affected and let them know who/where they can go to if they want to talk further.
- » Make referrals to wellbeing teams and external agencies as appropriate with consent.
- » Consider group programs for further debrief with other students who are personally affected (with MEAs, counsellors, Foundation House facilitators etc.).

### IMPROMPTU STUDENT-INITIATED CONVERSATIONS

Conflicts, persecution, and other humanitarian crises are constantly unfolding, some of which attract considerable media coverage. Students of refugee backgrounds are often impacted by such coverage, as it can remind them of their own traumatic experiences or those of loved ones remaining in danger. For some students, school may provide an outlet where they feel they can express concerns and discuss what is happening.

Conversely, crises that do not make the news in Australia can be triggering in other ways; students may feel frustrated or experience a sense of injustice because others do not know about or understand what is occurring.

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO:

- » Prioritise physical and emotional safety. Help students identify internal and external people and places that are safe.
- » If a classroom conversation is causing distress, it is best to redirect and resume it later in a more appropriate setting. Use protective interrupting where necessary, for example: 'Thank you. It sounds as though you have something important to talk about. Why don't we have a chat at recess/lunch?' Then redirect the conversation, ensuring that you follow up.
- » Identify potential triggers. Do not push for details or information that might cause trauma to resurface.
- » Keep an open mind and be empathetic.
- » Use activities involving mindful movement to bring students back into their bodies after a challenging conversation or disclosure.
- » Ensure that you follow up with students who are affected and let them know where/who they can go to if they want to talk further.
- » Make referrals (with consent) to wellbeing teams and external agencies as appropriate.
- » Consider group programs for further debriefing with other students who are personally affected (with MEAs, counsellors, Foundation House staff etc.).

## DISCLOSURE OF TRAUMATIC MATERIAL

Disclosures occur when students share their traumatic refugee experiences. Students may intentionally or incidentally disclose traumatic material during planned or unplanned classroom activities and discussions. Please utilise our resource [Responding to students' trauma disclosures](#) when preparing yourself to support students when this occurs.



The wellbeing of teachers and support staff is very important. Student disclosures can be very unsettling and challenging for teachers. Additional support such as EAP or reflective supervision may be needed for teachers due to the professional and personal strain that trauma disclosures can cause.

## USEFUL LINKS

• [Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre \(LMERC\)](#)

- expert assistance with selection and evaluation of resources
- referral to other information networks
- resource lists and bibliographies
- displays of resources for special events
- bulk loans (by negotiation)
- staff group visits (by appointment)
- postal service for government schools in rural areas.

• [Foundation House professional learning workshops](#) to support teachers in understanding the needs of students of refugee backgrounds

• [Foundation House Intake for referrals](#)



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