



Supportive Conversations with Students During Challenging World Events

Many events taking place globally increase feelings of distress for students locally. News and information, both fact-based and speculation, travels quickly in the digital age. It is not uncommon for young people, and adults, to experience a range of emotions and to have questions about challenging world events. Reactions may vary with developmental stage, physical or emotional proximity to the event, and prior experience with traumatic circumstances (e.g., students with family in affected areas, those with refugee backgrounds, those impacted by racial trauma). These feelings and inquiries often come to school. Educators may be concerned about how best to address these questions and emotions in a supportive and helpful manner.

Techniques like **Validation** and **Support** can be helpful. These techniques are part of an approach called Emotion Focused School Support (developed by Dr. Adele Lafrance), which is a practical way to help when students are feeling strong emotions at school. It prioritizes listening and validating emotions BEFORE moving to problem-solving/support.

Getting ready

Thinking of your 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, significant 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 them.

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.
- Give yourself permission to create more space for your own wellness during times of strain. Consider adding new strategies for personal resiliency if you think that would be helpful.
- 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 in balancing the load. Talk with your principal, or access your board Employee Assistance Program or other wellness support tools, as needed.



Validation

Validation is a way to acknowledge a student's experience, point of view, thoughts, and emotions. It requires us to identify our own world views and biases, and to set aside our own perceptions while listening carefully and reflecting back our understanding of a student's feelings. When we validate, we assure the student that we are taking their concerns seriously. It shows that we care.

In the case of challenging world events, students may approach an educator with feelings of worry, fear, sadness, anger, confusion, or a range of other concerns depending on their circumstances and proximity to the event (physically or emotionally). How feelings are expressed, and how validation is offered, will vary with developmental age.

You know your students well, so also take their culture, faith, strengths, identities, history and challenges into account as you validate their emotions. Without making assumptions about a student's thoughts or feelings, and checking your own biases, after listening, try to offer back reasons why a student might be feeling the way they are, and give lots of space for the student to share more as you float each "because" in a relaxed conversational way.

Examples for consideration

A primary student comes to you crying because older children told them that there was going to be a world war.

Using validation, an educator might say:

That sounds like very scary talk. I can see that it has made you upset. Maybe you are feeling scared? Or maybe confused? <help the student to label their emotions>. It makes sense that you would be feeling _____ because when someone says something like world war it sounds like the whole world is fighting <pause and check to see if you have understood correctly and follow the student's lead to see if this needs to be validated with further points>.

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

It makes sense that you are feeling worried about that news headline because it's scary to think about the possibility of an even bigger war...<pause or check if you have understood correctly> and because it makes you wonder if you and people you love are safe... <pause or check> and because you are feeling sad for the people who are living there...<pause or check>.

An intermediate student shows you a series of videos and posts 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 about the injustices that are being exposed on these social media posts because it's another painful reminder of the different ways that people are treated based on the colour of their skin...<pause or check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait> and because it appears to be happening in several ways in several places...<pause or check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait> and because there doesn't seem to be any consequences for those perpetrating the harm...<pause or check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait>.

A secondary student notes that they had to flee a country and 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 experience you and your family went through...<pause or check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait> and when you think back to those times, you think about everything that happened, and you wish you didn't have to feel all of that again...<pause or check if you have understood correctly, listen and wait>. I wonder if you are perhaps also thinking about those seeking refuge now and imagining what they are going through <pause or check>.



Support

Offering support becomes 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 a student feels fully heard, an educator can offer support.

Types of support

- **Offer comfort and caring words** – Sometimes, after a student shares their feelings, just sitting with this, and holding the feelings together with them is sufficient. A student may feel better just knowing that they are heard, understood and cared for.
- **Fill in the blanks** – There are times when a young student may be expressing strong emotions because they don't fully understand the situation (e.g., a child who watches the same video clip of a violent incident several times may believe that this same thing is happening repeatedly). Keep the information sharing brief, to the point, and developmentally appropriate. Be prepared to repeat this in different ways as the student may have trouble taking it in.
- **Provide suggestions for coping with worry and fear** – There are many ways to manage feelings of worry and fear that can be helpful. For example, calm breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization, distraction, re-framing, and gratitude. See the set of [Virtual Field Trips](#) for ways to share these tools with your class.
- **Provide suggestions for coping with sadness** – Some of the same strategies noted above can help with sadness. In addition, when we are feeling down, it can be helpful to get active and get busy. Increasing the number of pleasant activities in a student's day can lift their mood. Sometimes giving them a small task that leaves them with a sense of control and confidence can make a difference.
- **Suggestions for coping with angry feelings** – Some of the same strategies noted above can help with anger. In addition, students who experience racial trauma or marginalization who have been further harmed by observing such things associated with world events may value additional support. Connections with community and affinity groups may be helpful, to strengthen their sense of identity and self-love. Ask the student what would be helpful and walk alongside.
- **Reassurance** – In some circumstances, reassurance may be welcome and valid. In others, when safety can't 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.

Educators can support students using the same skills and sensitivity that they bring to other situations when a student may experience distress. Sharing their calm, being present, validating how they feel, and modelling skills that promote positive mental health and well-being are helpful in supporting students in times of uncertainty. You can also remind students that there are others at school, home, and in their community who they can turn to for help when challenging world events are causing strong emotions.

If a student seems to need more support, think about the circle of support that could be put in place to assist. This can start with connecting with their parent/caregiver(s), and checking in with school and board support staff, according to your usual pathways and processes. If you aren't sure about how to access student mental health supports, ask your principal, visit your board website, or check in with your board Mental Health Leader.

