

Talking about Israel and Palestine in school? Here are eight ways to help young people learn, think and act.

The attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent escalation of violence in Gaza are traumatic for everyone and our thoughts are with all those who have been affected. Young people have been regularly exposed to distressing images and information. In this context schools have a duty to be safe spaces where caring and responsible adults can help young people make sense of the world and have their voices heard. So, whether it's helping children to spot misinformation or to plan a safe action, there are many ways teachers can support young people to think about and respond to the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Palestine).



Khan Younis refugee camp established by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), photograph taken on 2 November 2023 (Picture: Ibrahim Alotla/Alef Multimedia/Oxfam)

Since 7 October 2023, there has been a terrifying escalation of violence against civilians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Palestine). By now, young people of all ages are aware of the unfolding death, devastation and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, whether it's through social media, conversations in the playground or picked up from the discussions of adults around them. Mainstream television news is frequently broadcast with trigger warnings of violence which leave many young people with questions or feeling anxious. They are turning to parents, carers, and teachers to talk about what they are seeing and hearing.

Many educators understandably feel that school should be a haven and refuge from the troubles of the world, and that difficult and controversial

issues are best not discussed. Others may feel unconfident about tackling complex issues in a fair and balanced way, particularly if they feel uninformed or don't have specialist knowledge. We will suggest that teachers do not need to know all the answers. However, teachers are in a unique position to help young people develop their own understandings of our complex world and, through this, to play their part in solving the challenges we collectively face.

Here are eight suggested ways teachers could support young people to respond to and understand the conflict – with signposts to some useful resources produced by a range of organisations. We have tried to include a variety of ideas for use with different age groups and contexts. Though the advice is aimed at UK teachers, we hope it will prove helpful to educators in other places too.

1. Facilitate conversations and support young people's well-being.

There are several online sources of advice for talking with young people about their well-being in general and what's happening in Israel and Palestine in particular. Much of this information is relevant for teachers too. For example, these tips from Young Minds are a useful starting point.

Conflict can be a difficult and emotive topic to explore in the classroom. Some young people may have personal connections with conflicts occurring around the world and it is important to be sensitive to their experiences. This helpful resource from the British Red Cross provides advice and suggested activities for using a neutral and impartial approach when discussing armed conflict with young people.

Oxfam's Guide to Teaching Controversial Issues contains guidance and classroom strategies for handling and exploring controversial issues, such as the conflict in Israel and Palestine, in an open, safe, sensitive and balanced way.

2. Develop an understanding of the present by exploring the historical context of conflict and peace.

'While we have a shared past, we do not have a shared history'.

Introduction panel to 'The Troubles and Beyond' exhibition, Ulster Museum, Belfast.

A 'common sense' view frequently presents history as being a single story consisting of uncontested facts and evidence. Modern approaches to history challenge this approach and stress the importance of how different interpretations and experiences create diverse histories from the same shared past. There are few places in the world where history is more contested than in Israel and Palestine. However, it is through reaching an understanding about the background and the course of the conflict over

decades that the present crisis and potential routes to peace may be better understood and misunderstandings and myths challenged.

The Middle East is a topic for examination in GCSE History (eg: EDEXCEL Option P5: Conflict in the Middle East, 1945-95). However, there are many resources which support young people to develop a balanced approach towards understanding and applying the history of the Middle East in their everyday thinking without following an exam course.

For example the *Parallel Histories* project presents useful methodology and content for teaching about the longer-term history of conflict in Israel and Palestine.

Solutions Not Sides and *Facing History and Ourselves* both begin their resources with helpful reflection, preparation and planning activities for teachers before suggesting activities which encourage young people to respectfully and thoughtfully apply history to their own understandings of the conflict and the information they are seeing in the media.

DECSY have a useful summary of many of the available resources for teachers [here](#)

3. Challenge misinformation – and support better understanding of what young people see and hear.

One important reason for talking with young people about current news events is to combat misinformation. Young people are more likely to access and share their news through digital and social media rather than mainstream sources. Many may find it difficult to tell whether what they are reading and seeing is true. Research by the Commission on Fake News and Critical Literacy in Schools found that only 2% of children and young people in the UK had the critical literacy skills needed to identify whether a news story is real or fake.



Critical thinking about images and news stories helps to challenge misinformation and fake news. (Picture: Radka Dolinska/Oxfam)

Therefore, supporting young people to develop the skills to critically evaluate the sources of information they are seeing is essential. Asking these questions about a particular piece of information is a good first step:

- *What is the source of this information?*
- *Who said it?*
- *What did they say?*
- *Are these facts or opinions?*
- *When was it published?*

Page 15 of [Oxfam's Teaching Controversial Issues guide](#) has a classroom activity to encourage young people to critically analyse the media and discuss issues around 'fake news'. There are many other resources online to help young people to navigate their newsfeed, for example this [lesson plan from The Guardian Foundation](#) or this [set of classroom resources from BBC Teach](#). Older learners could also investigate [how news stories are put together for different audiences](#), including how choices are made about what types of information to include.

The BBC published this news article about [fake news and deliberate misinformation](#) in media coverage of the Middle East and the Guardian explained why [fake news thrives](#) on online platforms.

BBC Newsround has a straightforward [checklist](#) to help young people identify fake news. In a conflict where access to journalists is restricted, even reputable media organisations have difficulty in verifying stories. They frequently highlight the challenges they face to accurately report the news.

4. Explore peace and conflict.

Even very young children will have some basic knowledge about the causes and consequences of disagreement, as well as strategies for avoiding, managing, and resolving conflict. For most, this will be based on their own experiences at a personal, classroom or family level, though there will be some with first-hand experience of conflict on a larger scale. Picture books are a great way of learning and talking about conflict and its impacts on people, as well as helping children to develop empathy for others. See this [book list from lovemybooks](#) for some suggested titles.

This [collection of teaching resources from the British Red Cross](#) could be used to explore conflict and its consequences. The Quakers in Britain also have a wide range of [resources for teaching about peace and conflict](#) including Israel and Palestine. This [blog post by Ellis Brooks](#), the Quakers Peace Education Coordinator, reinforces the teacher's role of principled impartiality in teaching about the conflict. It also reminds us of the considerable challenges facing educators in both Israel and Palestine to teach impartially.

5. Engage with controversial issues

Bringing these complicated topics into the classroom may provoke strong, varied and often divided opinions. We believe it's important to engage with, rather than avoid controversial issues. Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that young people are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views, while at the same time making it clear when any views expressed are discriminatory or violate others' rights. Young people need space and opportunities to think critically (see below) and reflect on their own and others' values and attitudes, and to do so with consideration and respect. Suitable for use with all ages from under-5s to post-16s, this [Oxfam Education guide for teachers](#) includes strategies, guidance and activities for teaching controversial issues.



Engaging with controversial issues can be safe, inclusive and fun (Picture: Andy Aitchison/Oxfam)

Schools and teachers are legally required to engage impartially with controversial issues in the classroom. The Department for Education published [non-statutory guidance](#) on political impartiality in schools in 2022. The partial and potentially confusing nature of this guidance has been highlighted, along with possible solutions, by [Our Shared World](#) and Ellis Brooks (see above).

6. Strengthen critical thinking skills.

Conflict poses many difficult value judgements. [Using philosophical enquiry](#) is one way to develop critical, creative, and collaborative thinking skills about complex topics. An opinion continuum or agreement line could be used to share viewpoints and values in the classroom (see p. 16 of [Oxfam's](#)

Global Citizenship in the Classroom – A guide for teachers). This simple activity encourages young people to think through and explain their positions on two opposing views and mark this on an imaginary line. *Are some conflicts more important than others? Is conflict ever justified? Are all human lives valued equally?*

7. Build empathy and challenge stereotypes.

There are many resources available online to provide an insight into the experiences of some of the millions of people globally who are affected by conflict. When using these materials in the classroom, it is important to be aware of and sensitive to the needs of young people with lived experience of conflict. These activities from Oxfam Education help learners to reflect on the importance of ‘home’ and think critically in solidarity with people who are forced to leave their homes because of conflict.

The Red Cross has resources on the Rules of War. Young people are encouraged to build empathy by viewing all people caught up in conflict as having universal and inviolable rights. They focus attention on the people affected by conflict and their rights rather than the geopolitical or strategic causes of conflict which often dominate the news and overshadow ordinary people’s hopes and experiences.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia both increased in the UK following October 7 2023, including in schools. Facing History and Ourselves have helpful guidance for recognising and challenging Antisemitism and Islamophobia in the classroom. Solutions not Sides has separate documents advising on bullying, hate speech and triggers in the context of the conflict.

8. Support young people who wish to take action and be heard

Many young people want to respond to crises in active and positive ways. Taking action can help young people to feel empowered, valued and engaged as they experience being part of bringing about positive change in the world, though it is important to make it clear such action is voluntary. As much as possible, children and young people should have ownership of selecting and shaping any personal action they decide to take. Providing a safe, open, inclusive, and respectful space for discussion and action in school helps to channel young people away from inaccurate, Antisemitic or Islamophobic content which risks deepening social divisions.

Action should be carefully discussed and planned with young people and could take the following forms.

Calling for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Oxfam has a summary of what's happening in Gaza and Israel [here](#)

The Red Cross has resources which explore the [Rules of War](#) and the importance of their consistent application in [Israel and Palestine](#). Since the conflict escalated, many humanitarian organisations, including Oxfam, have called for a [ceasefire](#) to avert further loss of life, suffering and permit humanitarian supplies to reach the population.

Young people may wish to join the call for a humanitarian ceasefire, whether, for example, by writing to or meeting their Member of Parliament or by taking a school-based action such as presenting assemblies or peer-taught lessons.

Care should be taken to ensure that young people's actions are inclusive and respectful to all.

Oxfam has a guide with practical activities for building youth leadership and teamwork for action [here](#)

Oxfam has a guide for how young people may meet their MP at school [here](#)

Fundraising

Humanitarian organisations, including [Oxfam](#), are fundraising to respond to the immense needs of people in Gaza. [Oxfam's Fundraising Guide for Schools](#) provides useful tips for organising fundraising led by young people in fun and creative ways.

Supporting a respectful and inclusive environment in school

The conflict has had an impact in the UK and elsewhere with increases in reports of Antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents, including in schools.

Young people's actions could focus on strengthening their school communities and supporting school to remain a respectful and inclusive environment.

Schools could take this further by signing up to [Schools of Sanctuary](#) – a national network of more than 300 schools in the UK committed to 'creating a culture of welcome and inclusion' for all.

Oxfam's [Schools Speak Out](#) programme supports young people aged 11–16 to demonstrate leadership, participate in our latest campaigns and take action to help create a fairer, more secure and sustainable world for everyone.



Young people plan social action as part of Oxfam's **Schools Speak Out** programme.
(Picture: Radka Dolinska/Oxfam)

Keep listening

Across all the above activities, and in any conversation related to Israel and Palestine, it will be important to keep listening and giving children and young people space to talk about their feelings. Be prepared for difficult questions – and remember that you don't need to have all the answers.

Many thanks to Liz Newbon for her blog on [*talking about the Ukraine War in school*](#), upon which this piece is based.

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