

Executive Directive 6: Student Safety Resources Considerations for Schools and Families

We recognize the impact of violence and trauma on our students, families, and school staff as we all struggle to process the lives lost, continuing violence and current world events, including the recent outbreak of war in Israel and antisemitic demonstrations around the world. School staff and parents may find themselves fielding questions from students and supporting them in processing what they have heard and seen.

In today's global environment, it is important to protect children and youth from bullying and harassment caused by anti-religious and ethnic-based bigotry. In response, Governor Youngkin issued [Executive Directive 6 \(ED 6\)](#), directing his administration to implement measures to confront and combat antisemitism and other forms of anti-religious bigotry and ethnic-based violence. The strategies in ED 6 encompass the comprehensive protection of all ethnic and religious communities in Virginia.

In March 2023, Governor Youngkin and the Virginia General Assembly enacted the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\) Working Definition of Antisemitism](#) as an educational tool to better identify and fight the scourge of antisemitism. As antisemitic incidents continue to increase both in this country and abroad, the IHRA definition is important guidance and a reference point to better educate and assess antisemitism in its contemporary examples.

The IHRA's working definition of antisemitism adopted by the Virginia General Assembly is:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

The IHRA Working Definition also highlights [several contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life](#) including: calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews; making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews; and accusing the Jews as a people of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust. Additionally, phrases like “From the river to the sea” are also antisemitic. We encourage you, your staff, and students to be aware of modern antisemitism's insidious nature and take a role in combating it.

The following considerations will assist school staff and parents as we work together to support our students during this difficult time.

CONSIDERATION ONE: How can we best support students and families that are directly affected by current world events?

- Administration and relevant staff (e.g., school counselors) should be made aware if a student or parent shares that they have family or friends directly affected by violence.
- Never force; instead provide space and opportunities to allow impacted youth to talk about feelings. If youth do share their feelings, it is important to listen, validate, and support.
- Youth express emotions in different ways and may exhibit different behaviors at home than at school. Some youth will not express themselves verbally, but changes in their behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns may indicate heightened sadness, anxiety, or stress. Look for changes in student behavior.
- Parents and school staff should monitor students’ behaviors and communicate regularly to discuss any changes in behavior or concerns regarding a student’s well-being (e.g., consistent sadness, changes in concentration, distractibility, changes in sleep or appetite).
- Avoid making assumptions about what a child or family needs. Instead, check in regularly with students and parents to offer support and an opportunity for them to communicate their needs.
- Maintain stability and consistency as much as possible. Youth can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance. Encourage and find ways to support students in keeping a regular schedule, and foster healthy nutrition, sleep, and exercise to promote physical and mental health and well-being.
- Help students identify a self-care routine that allows time for activities that reduce stress and feelings of uncertainty. This may include reading, taking walks, exercise, journaling, listening to music, art, playing a game, or anything else that grounds them and helps them gain a sense of control.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Traumatic Events (also available in Spanish), National Institute of Mental Health	This document includes information on typical reactions to traumatic events and tips for how adults can help.
Addressing Grief: Tips for Caregivers and Educators , National Association of School Psychologists	A tip sheet for adults supporting grieving students. Information includes: grief milestones, warning signs, tips on how to help, and what to avoid when talking to youth experiencing loss.
VDOE Suicide Prevention Webpage	When school personnel, families, and communities take an active role in suicide prevention, lives can be saved.

CONSIDERATION TWO: How can parents and school staff respond to student questions and/or concerns about violence and current world events?

- Emotional responses to unsettling circumstances vary in nature and severity from individual to individual. Monitor student reactions and communicate any concerning reactions to parents. When in doubt about a youth's ability to cope, communicate concerns to parents and seek support from school mental health professionals.
- Look for clues that children/youth want to talk, but don't force conversation.
- Avoid singling out students to speak on behalf of a country or religious community. Follow the lead of your Jewish or Muslim students on what they wish to share publicly.
- Instead of dwelling on violent acts, discuss the humanitarian efforts occurring as well as the safety protocol and features at your school.
- Establish and use group agreements or rules to ensure the discussion about these events are respectful and kind.
- Avoid dismissive statements such as, "It will all be okay," or "You don't need to worry about that." Remember that it's okay to say, "I don't know" when youth ask questions like "When will the conflict end?" Acknowledge how frustrating the uncertainty is by saying "It's hard not to have all the answers." Provide some reassurance by discussing actions taken by others to address safety.
- Simply be available and show empathy for how students are feeling by acknowledging that this is a difficult time for everyone.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
Talking to Children About War : The National Traumatic Stress Network.	Wars and conflict can cause a range of emotions in children. This resource addresses considerations for military connected families, media exposure, and responding to children's questions.
Supporting Youth Affected by the Violence in Gaza and Israel: Tips for Families and Educators , National Association of School Psychologists.	Caregivers and educators can help children and youth feel safe by helping them understand what is going on factually, how events do or do not affect their lives, and how to manage their emotional reactions.
How to Talk with Kids About Violence, Crime, and War , Commonsense Media	Exposure to graphic imagery and disturbing news can affect children's well-being. Get ideas for supporting your child when they learn about tragic events.
How to Talk to Your Children About Conflict and War , UNICEF	Eight tips to support and comfort children. While this article is geared towards parents, school staff may also find some of these tips useful.
Explaining the News to Our Kids , Commonsense Media	Disturbing news events can leave us speechless. Knowing how and when to talk with youth and when to listen can help.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
Talking to Children and Teens About the Israel-Gaza War , National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement	Guidance for parents/caregivers and other caring adults looking for information on how to support children.

Keep explanations developmentally appropriate:

Elementary

- Let children's questions tell you what information they need. Don't assume they are concerned about the same things you are.
- Avoid offering unnecessary frightening details.
- Provide brief, simple information with reassurance. One way to do this is with the use of a broadening technique for responding to questions (e.g., "It sounds like you have some concerns about what's next. Let's talk about how our school/community/country is striving to keep us safe.")
- Clarify misconceptions or misinformation.

Middle and High School

- Answer questions and assist in separating reality from misinformation or misconceptions.
- Emphasize youth's role in safety at home and at school and how to access support.
- Validate feelings and thoughts, and provide the facts needed to appraise the degree of personal threat.
- Recognize there may be differing views on the war and encourage students to remain respectful.

CONSIDERATION THREE: How can adults create a supportive environment where students feel safe at home and at school?

- Maintaining a consistent and normal routine at home and at school helps students cope with their emotions and feel safe. Students are looking to school staff and parents to maintain a calm and safe environment at school and at home. Youth can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance.
- Limit live news coverage. It may be extremely stressful, traumatizing, or retraumatizing to students.
- Adults should be cognizant of their conversation around this topic, especially with children/youth in proximity. Their fears may heighten the fears of their child.
- Point out reassuring safety features of your school. Highlight how schools are often some of the safest places we can be. Identify specific individuals or groups responsible for school safety.
- Provide opportunities for students to seek connection and support within their school community. Knowing they're not alone and are spending time with people who share similar experiences can help kids feel valued and accepted.

- Focus on what connects us all. Standing up against hate speech, celebrating differences, promoting social connections, fostering relationships, and respecting all cultures and customs can combat divisiveness in our communities.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
How to Talk to Kids about Violence , Child Development Institute	Tips for parents to consider while maintaining a safe environment for children amidst violence.
Resilience in a time of war: Tips for parents and teachers of elementary school children , American Psychological Association	Tips for adults to maintain safe environments for young children and to guide children beyond fear to resilience.
Resilience in a time of war: Tips for parents and teachers of middle school children , American Psychological Association	Tips for adults to maintain safe environments for middle-school aged children and to guide children beyond fear to resilience.

CONSIDERATION FOUR: How can we reduce and respond to incidents of bullying or harassment?

- Encourage all students to treat others with respect and dignity regardless of differences in culture and beliefs.
- Take clear, swift actions to intervene with situations of bullying or harassment and review bullying prevention activities. Remind students of school and district policies related to offensive language, harassment, and bullying.
- Check in with students who may be at risk for bullying and harassment. Reassure them that there are adults who can help, and work with them to seek out an adult they trust and are comfortable talking to.
- To prevent stereotyping of cultures and countries, be vigilant and aware of conversations between students regarding the violence in Israel and Gaza. Children and youth can easily generalize negative statements being made by the media and echoed by caregiving adults.
- Encourage social connectedness and a sense of belonging. Adults can model building and emphasizing social connections by recognizing that all students and families bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge to our society. And by allowing opportunities for youth to share their knowledge about their origins, customs, and culture.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
Bullying Prevention Webpage , Virginia Department of Education	Schools have an obligation to adopt policies and procedures to educate school staff about the harmful effects of bullying and the need to create a “bully-free” environment.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
Bullying Prevention Newsletter , Office of Specialized Student Services	October was Bullying Prevention Month. Ensuring that staff know how to accurately identify bullying and how to respond correctly is a vital part of any school’s bullying prevention plan.
Reducing the Effectiveness of Bullying Behavior in Schools - Center on PBIS	The article provides an overview of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) as a framework for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of practices to prevent school violence and bullying behavior.
Bullying Prevention in a Tiered Framework – Center on PBIS	Schools implementing a tiered framework for bullying will find it to be an effective framework for preventing and reducing bullying behavior in schools.

CONSIDERATION FIVE: How can we support students from various religious backgrounds, including students who are Muslim?

- Ensure that students from different religious backgrounds have access to resources and support that meet their unique needs.
- Bullying, taunting and other negative actions towards students of any religion should never be tolerated.

RESOURCES	SUMMARY
School Counseling Webpage , Virginia Department of Education	School counselors play a unique role in local school divisions and can assist in supporting Muslim students.
Free To Learn: Inclusion, Rights, and Accommodations for Students of All Faiths and Non Conference Resources, U. S. Department of Education, Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships	The U.S. Department of Education hosted a “Free to Learn” conference that addressed students’ faith-based rights, which included research on Islamophobia and antisemitism in schools. School leaders should use the conference resources to create safe and inclusive learning environments.