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| **Please note:** The discussions you have with your students in these activities need to be handled sensitively and with consideration given to students’ backgrounds and experiences. You want to make the classroom a safe place for your students to share their ideas and even experiences. Some students may want to be excused from certain discussions and this should be respected. For some children it could be the first time they have addressed this issue or understood it from a different perspective.  |

You may find the suggestions here a useful reminder, even if you are already experienced in handling sensitive topics.

2:

 How to Teach Sensitive Topics

**Before the session:**

Let participants know in advance the sensitive topic you will be discussion in the next lesson. Reassure them if are uncomfortable discussing the topic they can let you/the teacher know and they will be given other options. If they wish to participate but are concerned that it could be upsetting, give them appropriate steps to take like leaving the room if necessary, and discussing the matter further with you or an appropriate colleague (such as a school counsellor or someone more experienced). Post on a wall, support lines that can offer children support and resources.

**At the start of the session:**

If you already have standard “ground rules” in place for managing inclusive and respectful discussions in the classroom, refer to them at the beginning of the session as you explain that you will be discussing important but sensitive issues.

If you do not already have such ground rules, can you develop them with your students? This will help them to exercise their critical thinking and empathy skills and they will have more ownership and commitment to respecting the rules. The rules can be illustrated and displayed in the classroom for regular use. Prompt questions:

» *What rules do you think we should we have to make sure that everyone feels safe to express their opinions?* [Regarding confidentiality, people outside of the group won’t need to know who said what (unless one of the students says something that makes the teacher feel they aren’t safe or need some help or support outside of the activity)]

» *How can we give everyone a chance to express themselves, not just the students who feel confident?* [Only one person talks at a time; no interrupting; listen carefully and respectfully to what others say; use a “talking stick” if necessary (only the person holding the stick can talk); a student can write their idea if they don’t want to say it out loud; if someone hasn’t said anything, we can ask if they’d like to (without forcing them) etc.]

» *What should we do if someone doesn’t want to express their opinion?* [Respect this and don’t force them to speak or embarrass them (expressing an opinion is a right, not an obligation); understand that some people feel more confident than others to speak out in a group, but that everyone has valuable opinions that they can express in lots of different ways to suit them]

» *What should happen if we disagree with each other? How can we disagree in a respectful way, not in a hurtful or rude way?* [Politely ask the person to give reasons for their opinion so that we can understand it better; challenge the idea, not the person; thank the person for sharing their idea, and explain that you have a different idea and why; use language like “I think…”, not “You are…”; don’t use offensive comments, insults or bad language; take a deep breath to calm down before speaking if you are angry or very excited; understand that there is no such thing as total freedom of expression (for adults or children): we can’t say absolutely anything we want if it hurts the rights or reputation of another person, or if it encourages people to hurt other people; before you say something, think “Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?”; say “thanks for taking the time to explain. We can agree to disagree on this issue” etc.]

» *What should we do if someone gets upset?* [Let a friend comfort them; give them the chance to continue or to leave the discussion; don’t draw attention to them or force them to say what’s wrong, but respect their privacy; have a quiet corner of the room where they can go if they need to; the teacher can offer to talk to them separately; welcome them back into the activity if/when they’re ready etc.]

* Lead into the topic gently. If you are short of time, don’t be tempted to skip the “setting the scene” discussions or activities. It can be helpful to imagine that you are carefully opening the lid of a jar of sweets/marbles/beans (which represent potentially sensitive emotions). You don’t want all of the contents suddenly flying out, uncontrolled across the floor. Instead, open the jar slowly and tip out the contents carefully and delicately.
* As much as possible, focus on solutions rather than problems.
* If you think it’s necessary based on the local context (cultural considerations, particular personalities and dynamics in the group etc.), you could divide the class into smaller groups based on age, gender or experience to create a more relaxed atmosphere to encourage students to participate.

**Throughout the session:**

* Keep an eye on students’ body language and how they are interacting with each other. Is anyone getting upset? Is anyone uncomfortable or very withdrawn? Intervene gently and appropriately. Give them the opportunity to stop participating in the activity as necessary. (See also the advice in ground rules regarding if a student gets upset).
* Change the atmosphere by interspersing either some “energizing” or some “calming” activities if necessary.

 **At the end of the session:**

* Make sure to close the session properly. You need to gently gather all of the “sweets/marbles/beans” back into the “jar” and close the lid. You can do this by: having the opportunity for students to feed back from their group work and to ask any questions; offering them the chance to speak to you separately after the lesson if they’re worried about anything; thanking the students for their thoughtful/creative/ interesting contributions and for listening to each other in a kind and respectful way; expressing that you are proud of them for contributing their valuable thoughts on this difficult topic; moving the discussion towards a positive note (looking to the future); ending on a positive, preferably fun note (age-appropriate song, dance, joke etc.).

**After the session:**

* Be prepared for students to approach you to discuss anything that might be bothering them.
* Follow up on anything you promised to do, for example finding out more information about something.
* If possible, feed back to the class throughout the year on how the WLL/UNICEF campaign is going (e.g. by keeping up to date with relevant social media or email posts).

**Further reading:**

You may find the following sources of advice on how to approach controversial topics in the classroom useful.

[Oxfam UK’s guide to Teaching Controversial Issues](https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/teaching-controversial-issues)

[The Historical Association’s guide to Teaching Emotive and Controversial History](https://www.history.org.uk/resource/780)