

How to Teach Sensitive Topics

Some of the discussions you have with your students in these activities need to be handled sensitively and with consideration given to students' backgrounds and experiences. Some students may want to be excused from certain discussions and this should be respected. You may find the suggestions here a useful reminder, even if you are already experienced in handling sensitive topics.

Before the session: Let participants know in advance the sensitive topic you will be discussing 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).

At the start of the session:

Establish a "group agreement" for managing inclusive and respectful discussions in the classroom. If you already have one in place, refer to them at the beginning of the session.

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 Is anyone uncomfortable or very withdrawn?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. Change the atmosphere with either some "energizing" or "calming" activities if necessary.

- What should we do if someone doesn't want to express their opinion? [Respect this and don't force them to speak (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? [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 "We can agree to disagree on this issue" etc.

At the end of the session:

Make sure to close the session properly. Give 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.

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.