

# ANTISEMITISM IN SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

## ADVICE FOR TEACHERS & SCHOOL LEADERS

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### What is antisemitism?

Antisemitism is prejudice or hatred against Jews.

It has existed in various forms for more than 2,000 years, based at different times on actual or perceived differences between Jews and others, along religious, racial, ethnic and national lines.

One of the best contemporary definitions of antisemitism is that adopted, in May 2016, by the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#), a coalition of 31 member states and 11 observer states. On 12 December 2016, the [Government announced](#) that the UK would be one of the first countries to formally adopt the definition.

In recent years, the rate of antisemitic incidents has been stubbornly high, according to research by the UK Jewish community's third-party reporting agency, [the Community Security Trust](#).

In this period, antisemitism has sometimes shown increases in direct correlation to increases in violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but this is not the only 'trigger'.

Like other forms of prejudice, antisemitism has been evident in direct interpersonal interactions, as well as on social media.

In school settings, antisemitism might be levelled at individual Jewish pupils or teachers, or expressed as a prejudice against Jews as a whole.

Some examples of antisemitic sentiments may include:

- Support for – or failure to oppose – terrorism against Jews in the UK or abroad
- Celebration, denial, trivialisation or revision of the Holocaust;
- Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories about 'Jewish control' over politics, the media or finance
- Theological antisemitism;
- Crude stereotypes about Jewish physical appearance or relationship to money or power.
- Exceptional treatment of Israel, where the world's only Jewish state is uniquely subjected, among all the countries in the world, to hostile behaviours such as denial of its right to exist or holding it to standards not expected or required of any other democratic nation.

Antisemitic behaviour in a classroom setting might include:

- Racist abuse – including name-calling or Nazi gestures
- Physical bullying – including violence or intimidation
- Graffiti – on school or personal property
- Exclusion by peers

## What are a school's responsibilities?

Schools and colleges have a fundamental duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The 2016 statutory guidance general guidance on [\*Keeping Children Safe in Education\*](#) speaks about the general duties of child protection and safeguarding, including from hate, a category which would include antisemitism. Also relevant to this area are the promotion of Fundamental British Values, anti-bullying policies, Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development and the Equality Act 2010.

Leaders and all staff in educational settings are required to be diligent in their care and a school's policy and ethos should encourage respect for all. Schools should also have robust procedures in place for tackling bullying and discrimination. All of these factors should provide a strong framework for confronting antisemitism.

Particularly when discussing controversial political issues, like the Israel-Palestine conflict, one should also be mindful of the legal responsibility, enshrined in the 1996 Education Act, that students must be offered "a balanced presentation of opposing views".

## Creating a positive school environment around issues concerning Jews

Schools should look to enable both students and teachers to:

- Understand Judaism as one of the major world religions, including the importance of Jewish beliefs and ethics in the development of Christianity, Islam and wider civilization.
- Develop awareness of the role that Jews have played in history and the contribution they have made to European and other cultures;
- Gain an understanding of the Holocaust in the context of the history of antisemitism
- Understand the basis for the creation of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and develop a nuanced understanding of the conflict between Israel and its neighbours
- Accept diversity among peoples and acknowledge the coexistence of diversity and equality, i.e., common humanity. The promotion of human rights and equality may empower students to recognise and respect differences among people;
- Become aware of antisemitism as a problem of the majority society and not of the minority itself and to realise the negative impact of antisemitism upon our societies and ourselves;
- Encourage learners to question simplistic interpretations of the world, such as portraying issues as either absolutely good or evil, by developing critical modes of thinking;
- Gain an insight into how prejudice, scapegoating, conspiracy theories, and mechanisms of exclusion work;
- Develop the ability to identify with the position of a minority that is confronted with discrimination and resentment;
- Learn to oppose discriminatory and offensive prejudices and to foster personal responsibility as citizens in democratic and pluralistic societies.

## Engaging with antisemitism in the classroom

The following suggestions are designed for educators who want to include the topic of antisemitism in their teaching, develop awareness in the classroom, and respond to antisemitic comments and/or outbursts in the school's community.

### **Establish a constructive environment:**

Teachers and students should create an inclusive atmosphere, in which everybody feels safe to discuss sensitive issues openly. Ground rules that allow for an honest discussion in a respectful way should be developed. Teachers should be aware of hierarchies in the classroom and try to integrate all learners into this process. Students should be given the benefit of the doubt. The creation of such an environment may support teachers in their attempt to discover why a student subscribes to antisemitic views and stereotypes. Fears, frustrations, and negative personal experiences tend to make individuals more susceptible to easy solutions offered by these negative viewpoints.

### **Be patient:**

Teachers should allow time for a process to develop and proceed step by step. One way of doing this is to introduce less complex topics first or to find a starting point that relates and appeals to the students. It may also be advisable to keep the topic in view, i.e., to refer back to it in the context of another teaching unit, if there is a connection. Patience is also required in finding the right approach for different age groups and providing the right level of information.

### **Be clear and consistent in your reactions:**

Teachers should be prepared to respond to manifestations of antisemitism in the classroom, as silence conveys the impression that prejudiced behaviour is condoned or not worthy of attention. While different ways and strategies of reacting to such expressions may seem appropriate in different situations and contexts, it should always be clear to the students that there is a policy of zero tolerance with respect to antisemitism. Transparency and clarity towards pupils and their families is critical in this respect.

### **Avoid preaching:**

Preaching is an ineffective methodology for changing prejudiced attitudes; in fact, it often produces the opposite effect. Educators should therefore provide opportunities for students to resolve conflicts, discuss problems, work in diverse teams, and think critically. In the end, interactive and engaging teaching strategies may ensure that this difficult topic is not avoided by students, but rather becomes an issue in which some of them may even develop a deeper and long-lasting interest.

### **Remember that individuals make a difference:**

Every person has a choice and is therefore responsible for their own actions. Examples from history and contemporary society can be useful when illustrating this principle. Students should have the opportunity to realise and learn that they are responsible for their actions, while also recognising the impact of those choices. This includes making them aware of the positive effect on the community that civic engagement and socially responsible behaviour can have.

### **Be realistic:**

Even if teachers should always try to prevent and respond to antisemitism, there are, of course, limitations. It is important to establish goals and to realistically assess the possibilities and limitations of educational efforts. Naturally, a single teacher with limited resources and time constraints will not be able to fully solve the problem of antisemitism.

**Encourage self-reflection:**

Teachers and students alike should reflect on the images of Jews that come to their mind and think about whether they have been influenced by prejudices. If there are Jewish students present in the class, it is important to be sensitive to their perspectives. As in all cases of prejudice, the learning process can evolve around realising that individual experiences or characteristics should not be generalised and projected onto an entire group.

**Use life experiences:**

Teachers can provide opportunities for students to share life experiences. The classroom can be a place where diversity is appreciated and students' experiences are not marginalized, trivialized, or invalidated. Many learners will find it easier to start talking about antisemitism if they have an opportunity to focus on their own experiences, such as with discrimination and multiple identities. At the same time, they should learn to abstract from their own experience and to differentiate rather than generalise.

**Develop critical thinking:**

In order to combat prejudice, it is important to become aware of different perspectives. For example, the reading of a source that is written from the point of view of a Jewish person who experienced antisemitism may create a greater understanding and empathy for what it feels like to be discriminated against or offended by manifestations of antisemitism. Taking different perspectives also comes into play when studying pictures and images. Learners should be shown that some pictures of Jews were purposefully taken by antisemites. For example, it may be important to ask students to analyse the motive of the person behind the camera.

**Try to avoid victimisation:**

Jews should not be perceived as victims. Rather, they are individuals who have their own lives and personalities and whose identity is made up of many different components.

**Focus on the diversity of what it means to be Jewish:**

Antisemitism works through stereotyping, generalisations, and false attribution. In order to counterbalance these distortions, it can be useful to introduce learners to many diverse examples of what it means to be Jewish. Different approaches to this identity can be found in both history and contemporary society, also among youngsters.

**Connect the school with the wider community:**

It may be worthwhile to involve parents, other family members, and the wider community in the learning process, as they provide the context (both positive and negative) in which students are motivated to learn. Ideally, a wider network in support of tolerance may emerge from these efforts.

**Call in help when necessary:**

The school administration, parents, the police, and the wider community should be consulted in cases of violence or ongoing harassment.

**Try to offer alternatives:**

Young people who are in the process of finding and exploring their individual identity often look for symbols, groups, and ideas to identify with. In an effort to prevent them from subscribing to extremist views, it is recommended that as much space as possible be provided for expressions of identity that do not cause any harm and that they be introduced to as many alternatives as possible besides joining extremist youth groups. If the school is inclusive and sensitive to individual needs, while also offering students opportunities to freely express themselves in an atmosphere of respect and understanding, an important step has been taken.

**Accept that solutions are hard to find:**

Antisemitism sometimes appears to offer frustrated and angry people seductively simple solutions to tricky questions. It may be useful to realise and accept that some issues remain insoluble and contradictory. Politicians, peace activists, and a variety of experts have at various stages tried to find a solution to the conflict in the Middle East and only partially or temporarily succeeded in doing so. It is therefore not realistic to assume that a solution can be found within the framework of a classroom. In that sense, educators may want to encourage youngsters to accept contradictions, insoluble problems, and social realities.

**The following questions may be of help when engaging students on the subject of antisemitism:**

- Who are the students? What are their religious, social, cultural, and political backgrounds?
- Have they had prior experiences with human rights, tolerance, and/or Holocaust education?
- If there are manifestations of antisemitism in this particular classroom, what are they connected to? Could it be that the students are exposed to antisemitism in the media, in their families, in other social circles, or in youth groups?
- What kinds of discrimination and prejudice exist within the group?
- What are their experiences with intolerance?
- Have the students had the opportunity for any personal contact with Jews?

Teachers who are aware of these factors may find it easier to respond to the specific challenges encountered in different settings.

**Antisemitic sentiment in the context of Israel's conflicts with its neighbours:**

Discussions about the conflict between Israel and its neighbours can become highly emotionally charged, not least in learning environments where students may have a direct personal or communal connection to the parties in conflict.

However difficult, teachers should not fear or suppress conversation about this topic, as a developed political awareness is important to the development of children. Students may appreciate being given an opportunity to discuss this issue in a non-biased way.

Teachers should instead look to ensure that students are encouraged to explore the conflict from a variety of angles and perspectives.

Teachers should also sensitise their students to the prominence of antisemitism in discussions and media coverage about the Middle East conflict. This might include helping students to understand antisemitic stereotypes and conspiracy theories, so that they can identify these themselves in relation to discourse about Israel.

It might also include identifying double standards, where one party to conflict is judged by a different measure to another in the same position, and helping students to challenge and explore this. The effect will most probably be stronger if students themselves identify something as antisemitic and demonstrate the ability to differentiate between justified and unjustified criticism.



### **Other good practice in relation to engaging children on the issue of antisemitism:**

Although there are many good practices for projects on the Holocaust in schools, it is rarer to find exercises and projects aimed at raising awareness about antisemitism, especially about contemporary antisemitism. Teachers considering offering exercises, projects, and workshops that engage students with the problem of contemporary antisemitism should focus not only on racist antisemitism, but also on the subtle and often unconscious forms of antisemitism that have been passed on from one generation to another. The following examples may be of use in this respect:

- Contact and meetings with the local Jewish community could be a way of learning more about Jewish culture and traditions and the activities of the community. Educators may also wish to consult resources and tools provided by both national and international networks, teacher associations, specialized institutions, and international organisations which specialise in this area. The Board of Deputies of British Jews has a range of educational resources and volunteers that can help with this, so please get in touch with us.
- In addition to or alongside the annual commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day, memorials for victims of antisemitism can be established, for example a plaque in memory of deported Jewish children from the respective school or victims of local antisemitism before and after the Holocaust;
- Swastikas and antisemitic slogans are written on many walls. There are initiatives where groups of pupils remove antisemitic graffiti in their neighbourhood;
- Visits to Jewish cemeteries may connect students to the Jewish heritage of their region. Many of these cemeteries have been desecrated or abandoned. Helping to restore them can be a worthwhile and rewarding experience;
- Local history in relation to prominent local Jews, or prominent local antisemites. This may be a starting point for a history project that provides learners with the opportunity for a critical dialogue about local history. The class could do research on Jewish residents or other individuals who have made a positive contribution to local life, or, conversely local antisemitic figures or incidents;
- Students can be encouraged to use the internet – which has become a major source of antisemitic propaganda – for the purpose of doing some research on organisations and institutions that combat antisemitism and promote tolerance. Alternatively, students may find it interesting to explore the work of famous music groups and/or actors that are committed to combating prejudice and intolerance;
- Advanced learners may engage with antisemitism in an intellectual way by considering different psychological, sociological, and philosophical theories that seek to explain antisemitism or by researching historiographical controversies about the topic;
- Student workshops can be organized with a view to strengthening arguments against antisemitism;
- Exchange projects with Jewish and/or Israeli students could help break down stereotypes, as well as expanding horizons;