

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' TRAUMA DISCLOSURES



**Foundation
House**

The Victorian Foundation
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' TRAUMA DISCLOSURES

Anticipating and sensitively responding to students' trauma disclosures supports their recovery from traumatic refugee experiences.

WHAT ARE DISCLOSURES?

Disclosures occur when students share their traumatic refugee experiences. Students may intentionally and incidentally disclose traumatic material. This can happen in a variety of ways, including:

- » Verbally
- » Through re-enactment in play
- » Through art
- » When they ask questions or tell stories
- » When discussing curriculum (e.g. relating to family, migration, war or government)
- » When talking or writing about their feelings

Children who share traumatic experiences can fear being overwhelmed by their feelings. Similar to when students exhibit trauma reactions, their sharing about traumatic events may signal a need for counselling. This means you should follow up with students, even if you feel you cannot help.

HOW TO RESPOND WHEN STUDENTS SHARE TRAUMATIC REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

Often disclosures happen in contexts where some staff/teachers cannot readily respond—and not all staff will be able to manage disclosures. However, when possible, the following steps are recommended:

- » Give the student your full attention. If disclosure occurs in a group context, be mindful of the student who is sharing and others present. Do not be afraid, however, of the student talking about the traumatic event
- » Allow the student to control the level of disclosure about past and current experiences. Students may not tell you everything in one go, but may reveal their experiences over time
- » Acknowledge the student's feelings about the event. This means saying things such as: 'That sounds very frightening/upsetting', 'That must have made you feel sad/lonely/worried/angry'



- » Indicate that the student's response is usual, given their past experiences. Say that it is common for children or young people to feel this way after difficult or worrying experiences
- » Let the student know that if they would like to discuss their experiences further, the school has support staff available
- » If you need to involve other adults, let the student know your plans to do so (if age-appropriate). Ensuring students have opportunities to meet support staff
- » Seek advice from your schools' wellbeing team. If appropriate, take a team approach to supporting the student involving class teachers, wellbeing staff, school leadership and the student's family
- » Offer follow-up support. For example referral to school wellbeing or Foundation House

BE CAREFUL NOT TO:

- » Challenge or interrogate what the student is saying
- » Correct the student if they mix fact and fantasy when they recall events

IN CLASS PROTECTIVE INTERRUPTING

When disclosure occurs in a group setting, such as in a classroom, it is important to be mindful of the needs of the student disclosing and other students in the group. If you feel a student is disclosing something private, or something that is more appropriate to discuss one-on-one, you can protectively interrupt the student.

HOW TO PROTECTIVELY INTERRUPT

Gently interrupt the student by acknowledging them and preventing further disclosure. You can say something like: 'Thank you. It sounds as though you have something important to talk about. Why don't we have a chat at recess/lunch?' Then redirect the conversation.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Working with students and families who have survived refugee experiences can arouse many emotions. After hearing about refugee events from students, you may experience some of the trauma responses exhibited by your students. Common feelings and reactions include helplessness, guilt, anger, fear and avoidance.

- » Try to maintain a balance between empathy and professional detachment, which enables you to act in students' best interests.
- » Maintain confidentiality and seek professional support if necessary. It's important not to carry the burden alone.
- » Get help with your own reactions. The [Be You website](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au) provides a variety of practical staff wellbeing resources for you to explore.

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