

CONVERSATIONS THAT **MATTER**



Understanding and Discussing Antisemitism with Young People



ADL[®]

EDUCATION

*This resource was created in collaboration by ADL
and the Association of Jewish Psychologists.*

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Introduction

All young people have the right to feel safe, supported, and welcomed in school. Many do not.

In recent years, antisemitism [has surged](#) in the U.S and around the world. Young people are increasingly experiencing, witnessing, watching and, in some cases, perpetrating antisemitism at school. Many students who are Jewish, targeted by antisemitism, feel unsafe, afraid, vulnerable, excluded and isolated in school. They may feel powerless that there's anything they can do about it.

Acknowledging that K-12 schools need to do more to educate all students about and address antisemitism, this resource is intended to help parents, families and other trusted adults in young people's lives. The guide includes the following topics:

- How does antisemitism manifest in schools and communities?
- What does the data say: antisemitism in schools, communities and online.
- The psychological impact of antisemitism on young people (emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral and academic indicators).
- Strategies for parents and trusted adults to help young people cope.
- Empowering young people by engaging them in allyship, advocacy and activism.



How Does Antisemitism Manifest in Schools and Communities?

As students walk through the hallways, classrooms, buses and athletic fields of our nation's K-12 schools, antisemitism shows up in different ways. Here are some examples:

- Being called an antisemitic slur or name.
- Swastikas and other anti-Jewish graffiti—both random and directed at Jewish students—etched in desks and lockers, in notebooks and hallways, in locker rooms and bathrooms.
- “Jew jokes” and other so-called “jokes” that are antisemitic in nature.
- So-called “jokes,” antisemitic names, slurs, swastikas, hate symbols and conspiracy theories rampant on social media, gaming and other online platforms.
- Trivialization or denial of the Holocaust and Holocaust-related “jokes” and body movements (e.g., Nazi salutes).
- Antisemitic taunts, teasing, bullying and harassment.
- Vandalism, attacks and assault.
- News stories about the Israeli-Palestinian crisis or celebrities spouting antisemitic vitriol that provides an opening for increased insults and antisemitic language in school.

Antisemitism is a system of bias which means that it shows up in all aspects of our lives and society: in interpersonal communication and behavior (e.g., slurs, bullying, stereotypes, offensive language and “jokes”), through discriminatory policies and practices, and in our laws and institutions. This results in Jewish people experiencing specific kinds of exclusion, disrespect, mistreatment and harm.

Parents and family members, especially parents of Jewish young people, worry about the psychological and other harm antisemitism is having on their children. They want to help their children understand what antisemitism is, how to cope with it and how to confront it. And they want it to stop. It's important that parents and families provide space and emotional support for their children and to understand the bias their children are experiencing, hearing about, witnessing and perpetrating. They want to and should learn how to advocate for their children in school and help them feel empowered to do something about the antisemitism they are experiencing.



What Does the Data Say? Antisemitism in Schools, Communities and Online

To understand the larger context in which antisemitism shows up in schools, communities and online, it is important to look at the data. There is considerable evidence that antisemitism—in attitudes, incidents, hate crimes and online—is intensifying. These statistics are concerning and, in some cases, alarming.

- Each year, ADL tracks antisemitism across the country, including in K-12 schools. [Learn more about the ADL Annual Audit.](#)
- According to the F.B.I., [hate crimes in schools](#) have increased substantially over the past five years. Over a five-year period from 2018 to 2022, hate crimes in K-12 schools more than doubled, from 392 total hate crimes in 2018 to 890 in 2022. The most frequent reported victims of hate crimes in schools are Black students, followed by LGBTQ+ and Jewish students.
- ADL's [2023 survey of antisemitic attitudes](#) reveals that antisemitic attitudes in the U.S. are widespread and likely increasing: 85% of Americans believe at least one anti-Jewish trope, as opposed to 61% in 2019. Twenty percent believe six or more tropes, which is significantly more than the 11% that ADL found in 2019 and is the highest level measured in decades. There is also [more data](#) on attitudes during the months following the October 7 terrorist attack on Israel.
- ADL's [2023 online hate and harassment survey](#) illustrates that online hate and harassment rose sharply for adults and teens ages 13-17. Specifically, Jewish respondents experienced an increase in online harassment from 2022: 44% reported ever being harassed (up from 37%), 31% reported ever experiencing severe harassment (up from 23%), and 26% reported any harassment in the past twelve months (up from 21%). They were also more likely than in past years to avoid identifying themselves as Jewish, including on social media (25% in 2023 compared to 17% in 2022).
- According to [ADL's 2023 survey of hate and harassment in online gaming](#), hate and harassment in gaming is now so pervasive that it has become the norm for many players. 70 percent of Jewish adults experienced some form of harassment in online multiplayer games, though this data was collected before the 10/7 terrorist attack and subsequent Israel-Hamas war.

The Psychological Impact of Antisemitism on Young People

In the face of a reduced sense of safety and prolonged feelings of stress due to antisemitic incidents, bias and



feelings of exclusion, young people can develop stress reactions that may interfere with their daily wellbeing in school and in their community. Children, like adults, vary in their responses and needs, and may react differently. The longer the incidents last, the more severe the reactions may become for some children and adolescents. Parents know their children best and monitoring uncharacteristic changes they observe can be important and helpful in providing support and problem-solving. Indicators may occur immediately or as a delayed response days, weeks or even months after the incidents.

The frequency and severity of symptoms vary and some are likely to present themselves at school and/or at home. Your child's reaction depends on their age, personality and coping style. There is no "right way" to respond to difficult situations. Here are some possible signs of behavior changes that may indicate that your child is struggling after learning about or experiencing antisemitism, including anti-Jewish bullying.*

EMOTIONAL INDICATORS -----

Consist of symptoms such as pessimism, depression, anxiety, guilt (for not being able to help another who is bullied/scared/hurt), anger, mood changes, unpredictable and uncharacteristic emotions, feelings of numbness and detachment, grief (e.g., if family members died during the ongoing war in Israel), and emotional lability (i.e., unstable mood) or pain.

PHYSICAL INDICATORS

May include an increased state of arousal (exaggerated reactions), nightmares, somatic complaints (e.g., physical symptoms such as being tired, fatigue, stomachaches, headaches), sleep disturbance, recurrent bad dreams, pains and increased heart rate.

COGNITIVE INDICATORS

Consist of negative perceptions, "all or nothing/black and white" extreme thinking patterns, persistent intrusive recollections and worries, self-blame, loss of interest, disorientation, impaired memory, poor concentration, self-doubt, and negative expectations for the future.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

May include regressive behaviors such as clinging, bed-wetting, aggression, withdrawal, social isolation, dropping out of favorite activities (i.e., sports, arts, group recreational pursuits), agitation, re-enactment of aggressive experiences in art or writing, repetitive or obsessive play about events and startled reactions.

ACADEMIC INDICATORS

May include sharp change in academic engagement, decline in grades, school avoidance, struggle to advocate for self with teachers and administrators, changes in peer group and a lack of interest in school-based activities.

* If you are concerned about these behaviors or if your child requires additional mental health services or help, we suggest you consult with a mental health professional, your local service provider, ask at your child's school or contact the [The Association of Jewish Psychologists](https://www.adl.org/education).

Strategies for Parents and Trusted Adults to Help Young People Cope

Parents, family members and young people are facing growing antisemitic attitudes, behaviors and incidents that cause added stress and distress to their daily lives. It's important to be mindful that this additional stress is compounded by the stress and anxiety parents experienced trying to help their children readjust to in-person schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here are some strategies for parents and other trusted adults to help children and teenagers cope.

REINFORCE FAMILY CONNECTION



Remind yourself and your family (or other close and stable connections/relationships) what has not changed. Your family culture, your support for one another, your ability to advocate for your children in a trusted way, and your renewed appreciation for one another in the face of difficulties all remain solid. Parents and family members can rediscover their personal strength with the power to help children and teens feel comforted.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF



In order to take care of others, parents and trusted adults must take care of themselves. Children observe their parents and adult family members and are sensitive to their verbal and non-verbal responses. If they seem preoccupied and worried, young people may share less information with parents if they think that sharing will upset them. Children may also question whether they did something wrong and feel sad about it.

CHECK IN ABOUT YOUR OWN STRESS



It is helpful if parents and trusted adults check in with themselves about [their own stress levels](#). It is helpful if they plan proactively with simple anti-stress techniques that they find enjoyable (e.g., exercise, relaxation, socializing, listening to music) that also reduce stress. This not only helps parents manage their own stress but children may view these as behaviors to follow or activities to engage in together.

ANSWER YOUNG PEOPLE'S QUESTIONS



It is an understandable and common instinct of many parents to want to answer their children's questions. In fact, with younger children who ask "why" again and again, it is their way to keep communicating even when they understand the answers. As adults, we can misunderstand a child's question, as we interpret it through our own lens, perspective and experience. Try to answer only the question that the child is asking. If you aren't sure exactly what a child is asking, probe further with comments such as "tell me more about what you are asking" and "I want to answer your question. Can you ask it in a different way so I am sure that I understand what you are asking?"

When faced with and trying to cope with antisemitism, all children will benefit from having their feelings validated. However, older children and teens may want to spend more time being listened to and sharing feelings than asking questions. It is okay to admit that you do not have all of the answers, and by doing so you may open a productive conversation that will result in problem-solving together with your child.

PROVIDE SPACE FOR LISTENING

The act of being listened to and understood is a powerful tool to help young people feel supported and can also lead to problem-solving. When listening to children and teens,



respond with questions and thoughts such as, “Thank you for sharing that with me, Tell me more,” “I see, then what happened?” or “That sounds hard/tricky—is there something that I can do to support you right now?” Nodding while listening and staying quiet are helpful. Making sure you understand what is being said and reflecting back feelings is also helpful. You can say something like “Let me see if I understand” and then reflect back what you believe that you heard. Specifically for tweens and teens, ask, “Do you prefer that I just listen or that I share my thoughts and ideas?”

Some examples that are *not* helpful or may be seen as dismissive include: “You’ll be ok,” “Don’t cry/be upset,” “It could be worse” or “I know how you feel.” Further, jumping straight to solutions before empathizing and validating feelings can be counterproductive to sharing and empathizing.

BUILD RESILIENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE



Resilience is a process of becoming stronger through experiences, including adversity. Here are strategies to help build children and teens’ resilience in the face of bias and antisemitism.

- Identify the strong family and community relationships (i.e., school, faith-based institutions, community organizations, etc.), and teach young people how to reach out. This promotes a sense of belonging and awareness that they are not alone. There are people who can be there for them even when others have disappointed or hurt.
- Help to strengthen emotional skills as an asset. Remind children about how they were brave in the past, asking them to share examples about themselves and others being brave. Be mindful not to promise solutions that may not work. Ask children and teens for examples of how they helped or acted as an ally to another person and how it made them feel about themselves. Explore strategies to help them calm themselves and share what works for you. Try to find out how some strategies that work at home can be applied at school, and vice versa.
- Address competence assets. During vulnerable times of being targeted, bullied or socially excluded, remind young people about the characteristics that are linked to competence in given situations that connect with their other strengths and accomplishments. *Are they assertive in areas of interest? Do they persevere without giving up easily? How do they show good judgment? Do they usually set goals and plan in more than one area?* Then talk with them about how these strengths can be helpful with the present situation. It’s important to elicit this from the children, asking them to report and share their own feelings about strengths and competencies, rather than saying what you think their strengths are.
- Foster cultural identity and help affirm their Jewish identity—the joy, history, beauty and pride. Cultural identity provides a sense of self and pride about who they are. Amid the negative messaging about Jewish identity, it’s important to provide a balance. Connecting with their cultural identity, and others who share that identity, can promote mental health and counteract some of the negative rhetoric.
- Promote optimism assets. Use active/interpretive listening (from their viewpoint, regardless of your way of dealing with challenging situations) which will help them put their negative experiences and feelings into a more balanced perspective. Ask for their examples of activities that make them feel generous and supportive of others. Recall their adaptive ability to judge risks, call for help appropriately and regroup. Model optimistic thinking and your and their ability to learn from mistakes.

HELP PROMOTE SCHOOL-HOME PARTNERSHIPS



When teachers and parents work together on behalf of young people, recommendations and solutions come more quickly and are likely to be more effective and lasting. Teachers need to hear from parents/families in order to pay extra attention and provide help. Every child has a right to feel safe and have a sense of belonging at school. Children's schooling plays a central role in shaping their future, and parental involvement in education has a positive impact on children's academic achievement and socialization. The process of communication between parents and teachers is likely to provide valuable information about incidents of antisemitism that may take place outside of the classroom. Parents and family members may need to be reminded that they can and should initiate communication with the school in order for their questions to be answered, as well as for them to share information that will assist teachers in understanding their child and what they're experiencing. One-way communication from the school to the home is less impactful when compared to a two-way communication pattern. This will also allow for better monitoring of recommendations and checking what requires additional interventions.

ADDRESS ADOLESCENTS' NEEDS



Given adolescents' developmental needs and experiences, there are many changes happening at one time. On top of this, they may be facing antisemitism and feelings of unsafety as Jewish students. These needs and experiences are a tall order for young people who are also developing a sense of self while coping with their own confusion, transitions and expectations of others in their lives.

As a result, the developmental needs as adolescents include:

- (a) intellectual freedom to explore, question and at times, challenge.
- (b) positive communication with each other and the adults in their lives.
- (c) supportive attitudes.
- (d) greater autonomy and freedom.
- (e) acceptance by peers and adults.
- (f) a clear value system.
- (g) psychological security and a sense of competence.
- (h) opportunities to test their beliefs, exercise choices and new capacities.

When these needs are met consistently, adolescents tend to develop better coping skills, resiliency and higher self-esteem. In recent times, teens may have lost friends, witnessed or faced antisemitism, and feel sad or at a loss. As parents/family members, if you observe that your adolescent seems uncharacteristically withdrawn or unusually preoccupied, know that resources are available for consultation and follow-up. Consult with the mental health professionals at your child's school. It is important for them to know that support is available and can be accessed to lead to positive solutions for them and for their friends.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a reality of our lives and the lives of young people. Parents and families need to understand the impact of social media on their children and adolescents. Given their strong need for socialization, being included or excluded on social platforms can



impact your child's sense of self, belonging and mood. Antisemitic bias and bullying can take place virtually and impact your child just as much as similar harassments in person. It can happen while your child is at home without your knowledge and they may not tell you what's happening. Discuss the topic, model your own 'time out' from using social media, and discuss the topic with other parents and educators. Here are some resources to learn more: [Jonathan Haidt: Smartphones vs. Smart Kids \(2024\)](#), [Social media brings benefits and risks to teens. Psychology can help identify a path forward \(2023\)](#) and [Potential risks of content, features, and functions: The science of how social media affects youth \(2024\)](#).

Help your teen curate their social media feeds so that their viewing habits include positive Jewish content. Assist them in learning how to check in with themselves while on social media, helping them reflect on what they're seeing on social media and how it's impacting them. For example, young people can ask themselves: *How was I feeling before I scrolled TikTok or Instagram? And how has that changed since I have been online now for 20 minutes? Is there content that has a bigger impact on my mood?*

In addition to social media, parents are encouraged to monitor and limit access to news sources for both themselves and their younger children. Speak with teens about how constant doom scrolling and watching news reports may be impacting their mental health. Affirm their need to know what's happening in the news but model and explore how to modify their taking in of negative information that doesn't help them.

LOOK FOR THE "HELPERS"



Parents and trusted adults can reassure their children and teens that there are many people working hard to fight against antisemitism. It may be helpful to find some examples of individuals, communities and organizations that are speaking out and taking action to fight antisemitism. Connecting with organizations, volunteering and acting as an ally are just some of the many examples for how others are helping. To learn more, see the next section.

Empowering Young People by Engaging Them in Allyship, Advocacy and Activism

When young people witness or are targeted by antisemitism, first and foremost, they must be protected and supported and the antisemitism must be addressed. Schools have a responsibility to provide policies, procedures and strategies for preventing and responding to antisemitism. In addition, often young people want to take action to address the antisemitism they face. Taking action and doing something about antisemitism and other forms of bias can help to counter feelings of sadness, anger and powerlessness. Young people often want to be part of the solution.



Confronting and challenging antisemitism can take various forms—from allyship to advocacy to activism or a combination of all three.

- An **ally** is someone who speaks out on behalf of or takes actions that are supportive of someone who is targeted by bias or bullying, either themselves or someone else. Examples of ally behavior include reaching out to someone to whom an antisemitic slur or “joke” is directed, telling them you think it’s wrong and asking if you can help. Another is to say something directly to the person who said the slur, if it’s safe to do so.
- An **advocate** is someone who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy. An example of advocacy is writing a letter to your members of Congress to urge them to support legislation about antisemitism.
- An **activist** is someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change. There are many ways that [young people can engage in activism](#), including participating in a protest or rally focused on antisemitic hate crimes or organizing a petition to address antisemitic incidents in your community.

If young people express the need or desire to do something, ask open-ended questions to engage them in a conversation about what they might want to do: *What can we do to help? What individual and group actions will make a difference?* Explore together a right-size, age-appropriate action they can take. This can be something they do on their own, with others, as a family or something they propose to do in school or their community.

Getting involved can help young people feel like they’re taking meaningful action and that they can be powerful agents of change.

Additional Resources

- [6 Ways to Be an Ally](#)
- [6 Tips for Supporting Jewish Students in the Classroom](#)
- [9 Ideas for Teaching Jewish American Heritage Month](#)
- [Antisemitism Today](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)
- [Association of Jewish Psychologists: Resource Links](#) (Association of School Psychologists)
- [Awareness to Action: Challenging Antisemitism](#) (Student digital course)
- [Coping with Tragic Events in School Communities](#) (Association of School Psychologists)
- [Dear Colleague Letter: Discrimination, including Harassment, Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics](#) (U.S. Department of Education/Office for Civil Rights)
- [Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate](#)
- [Resources to Address and Challenge Antisemitism](#) (Collection page of resources)
- [Talking to Children about Hate Crimes and Anti-Semitism](#) (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network)