



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE HOLOCAUST INSTRUCTION

IN UPPER ELEMENTARY

As more schools and districts are teaching about the Holocaust across the grade levels, educators in the upper elementary grades are being asked to introduce the Holocaust in their classroom curriculum. It is possible to bring this history to younger students (grades 3 and up), but only with thoughtful care and intention. Addressing the Holocaust and its various lessons with students in grades 3-6 requires (1) attention to the developmental, social and emotional needs and capacities of this particular age group, (2) scaffolding of foundational concepts such as identity, prejudice, and empathy and (3) less emphasis on the atrocities of the Holocaust and more focus on the principles of justice, allyship and resilience.

Teaching elementary school children about the Holocaust is quite different from teaching this subject to older students. Not only are the teaching methods and resources different, but the rationale should be different as well. Children in grades 3-6 are building their own personal moral understanding and that of the world around them. As such, teaching them about the Holocaust offers a valuable experience that can help to introduce concepts of prejudice and antisemitism, respect for differences, standing up for others in need, and exploring what it means to be resilient. This early instruction, when done well, can help to create groundwork for learning the more difficult and specific aspects of the history in later years.

Echoes & Reflections recommends the following guidelines for teachers in grades 3-6 to apply to their planning, resource selection and instruction. These recommendations are informed by principles of human rights and grounded in children's social and emotional learning and development. Read on for more information.



Ensure a secure and supportive learning environment.

The overarching approach at this age should be to guide students “safely in and safely out” of this exploration.

Consider the following:

- Introduce the topic only after establishing a supportive and secure classroom environment where students are comfortable asking questions, expressing feelings, and exploring concepts with you and classmates. Be aware and mindful of the social and emotional needs of individual children (e.g., has a specific child gone through trauma recently?) Building this “safe environment” to discuss difficult topics creates a greater feeling of control for children and lessens uncertainty and fear.
- Reflect and affirm your goals of teaching younger children about the Holocaust, and choose resources and approaches accordingly. If the goal is to remember or commemorate, consider doing something reflective such as lighting a candle and adding content by using a story, reading a poem, etc. If the goal is to educate about this history, use vetted and trusted stories and resources created to support learning at this age level.
- Consider how your students may react to the subject of the Holocaust and antisemitism. What understandings or misunderstandings might they have, or have they been exposed to? What familiarity do your students have with Jewish people and what will they need to know before delving into this topic? Since the Holocaust and antisemitism raise issues of civil and human rights and humanity, exploring one’s own relationship to the topic before teaching children is essential.
- Thoughtfully plan how to introduce and debrief lessons to maintain clarity of purpose and support students’ emotional responses and reflections. This may involve “reframing” the lesson at the end with positive, affirming and action-oriented messages to focus on these elements instead of those that may be frightening or negative. Focus on the “helpers,” those who took actions of allyship and activism.
- Be mindful not to oversimplify explanations, bearing in mind developmental ages and stages. It is important to share that prejudice and injustice contributed to the Holocaust. At the same time, there is no need to provide specific details or information when not sought out by the students.
- Do not use **any** simulations or role-playing activities. This can be very damaging and traumatic for students, and does not help to advance their learning or personal understanding. Read this [Echoes & Reflections article](#) for more information on this topic.



Teach through storytelling, where the story is true.

One of the most effective and recommended approaches to Holocaust instruction with younger students is through age-appropriate stories, through books, films, or first-person testimony. Stories help students contextualize this complex topic in an accessible way, and offer a familiar framework for children – with a beginning, middle, and end. In the case of learning about the Holocaust, the story should be true. If a child asks, “Did that really happen?” The answer is always, ideally, “Yes.” Of course, true stories can be supplemented with fictional stories, especially if this helps elicit a moral question or dilemma, but the basis should be factually accurate. Educators should be transparent about whether the story is true. Telling true stories can also help combat Holocaust denial.

In deciding on an age and reading-level appropriate story, seek options in which:

- The main character is a child who survives – this will make the story more approachable and relatable, and provide comfort, even if there is some loss.
- There are “emotional anchors” – scenes/elements that build resilience and work against distress and instability. The anchors may be internal (the main character’s imagination) or external (the main character’s family, school, routine) but should be things that help children cope.
- Throughout the narrative, there should be positive developments in the story, not just at the end. This will help children feel more secure and less anxious or fearful as they learn about this history.

- The main character shows emotional strength and the ability to cope. The main character may be helped by others, showing the importance of mutual assistance and kindness: positive human values even during atrocity.
- There is no detailed description of harm or trauma.
- The message is one of survival and continuation of life.
- The message is one of respect, fairness, and kindness. The story should raise awareness of what is “just” and “unjust.”



Create and encourage empathy.

Empathy is the foundation for understanding different perspectives and exploring fairness and justice. It leads to an ability to see the “other” as a human being, and can help to build a society where people care about one another. This is a goal as well as a tool.

Teaching about the experiences of people during the Holocaust is an opportunity to inspire children to care about other people. In Holocaust instruction, these victims are those harmed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Younger students may not yet understand the historical context or chronology, but they can connect to others’ experiences on an emotional level.

Specifically for Holocaust instruction, one way to create empathy is to focus on Jewish people and their experiences before the Holocaust, which reveals the protagonists of the story you are telling as complex human beings. If your students have never met any Jewish people, other than those who were victims of the Holocaust, the misperception that all Jews are victims may feed into misguided antisemitic stereotypes. In addition, it is important to help children learn about Jewish people and the Jewish experience today, especially if they have limited exposure to Jewish people in their own lives.

Educators can build empathy by asking questions, such as “How do you think X felt when this happened?” or “Why did X react this way when this happened?” However, the question “What would you have done?” should never be asked. This creates judgmental attitudes, emotional distress, and distance.



Use primary source materials and a variety of authentic resources.

The choice of materials used in the classroom can help to create a connection to the story, strengthening a connection to the protagonists. Enrich children’s understanding of the story by providing multiple ways to understand it: through appropriate testimony of the survivor; pre- and post-war photographs, diaries, or other artifacts.

- All sources should be historically accurate and appropriate for children’s developmental age. More complicated or difficult sources should only be used when children are ready, so that they do not become frustrated or fearful. For instance, short testimonies for children of younger ages may be more engaging and helpful than photographs that might be too upsetting. Always review the primary sources carefully to avoid visual images or descriptions that would cause harm or distress.
- In choosing primary sources like books, the language used should match the complexity of the story and its visual presentation. If the primary sources include terms that are unknown to the child, they should be explained at a level that can be understood to reduce confusion or anxiety. (A **glossary** such as the one in *Echoes & Reflections* is helpful in explaining terms). Once the basic term is explained, students will be able to recognize it later in their educational journey and use it when the subject is taught at a later stage. Be aware that children’s understanding may be limited to their own experiences. Break down phrases and concepts in ways that children in this age group can digest and understand.
- In addition, consider that teaching methods will not reach all children in the same way. Some respond to verbal presentations, others to visual, others to hands-on, etc. Incorporating different teaching styles with different primary sources will allow the various learning styles to flourish.



Make it gradual.

Introducing and teaching a subject as sensitive as the Holocaust, and the related topic of antisemitism, requires scaffolding. Sensitive subjects should be introduced to students early in their educational journey, so that their understanding of these subjects can be complicated increasingly as they mature.

In the Holocaust context, the scaffolding works this way:

- As you begin to discuss this topic with children in this age group, use stories focusing on an individual child who survives the Holocaust. As the children become older/more mature, use stories that focus more broadly on the fate of a family.
- As students continue to learn about the Holocaust and depending on their emotional maturity, use stories with the broadest focus on the fate of an entire community.
- Remember, that although we are using certain historical concepts, the focus at the elementary school level is on empathy, not on history. Details that could cause distress, harm or trauma should be left out of the story.



Focus on “Light in the Darkness”.

Focus on topics that show mental fortitude and moral resilience, such as allyship, mutual help, creativity, the concept of rescue, including [Righteous Among the Nations](#), etc. This will support an understanding of the role of personal responsibility, including being respectful to others and acting as allies or challenging injustice.

Younger children are in the early stage of building their values. Teaching about the Holocaust in a way that emphasizes goodness and the topics above will help support students’ growth.



Debriefing/Processing - “Safely Out” of Learning.

Use activities that will allow the learners to process the information in the story, without using simulation or role-playing. These activities can be creative, using multi-disciplinary resources like art, music, photographs, and other artifacts. This will allow for reflection.

- Allow children to explore their reactions to the material. The construct of “I feel..., I think..., and I will...” allows for emotional connection, cognitive connection, and action.
- Allow time for reflection not just after the session is over, but even the next day and beyond. Some children may express strong feelings at unexpected times so pay attention as the day unfolds (or thereafter) to how children are acting and feeling. Be ready to respond by listening and acknowledging feelings and providing space for children to ask questions.



Keep families and administrators informed.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it is important for educators to ensure they are keeping parents/guardians and administrators informed of the choices and approaches to teaching this topic to younger children. Some states have recently enacted Holocaust education legislation for younger students, and reviewing and understanding related standards is essential.

Additionally, sharing information about the lesson and learning outcomes with students’ families prior to beginning this instruction will hopefully prevent any concern or opposition by developing openness and trust, and a line of communication to foster community connection, ask questions, and discuss any concerns.