

# 4.6

## TALKING ABOUT CRISIS



2 hours 30 minutes



Flipchart, paper, markers and pens, Handout 10: Let's Talk About It: Check-in guidance, Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios



By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Demonstrate basic support to children to help them process their feelings and experiences, before adjusting back into routine classes or activities
- Describe how creating a safe space supports children's wellbeing
- Demonstrate speaking and listening skills for supporting students' processing of their experiences, especially with the crisis or conflict
- Develop a plan for talking about the crisis or conflict in the classroom.



## Introduction



20 minutes



Flipchart, markers, pens



Whole group

- ➔ Display the learning objectives for the session. Invite a participant to read them.
- ➔ Explain that in this session, *Talking about crisis*,<sup>1</sup> they will learn about how to facilitate a welcome back session with students. They'll learn and practise important skills that will support them to speak to students about the difficult things they may have experienced and create a safe space where they feel heard and supported.
- ➔ Explain that because of current or recent crisis or conflict, children and families may have experienced displacement, loss of and separation from loved ones and attacks on homes and communities. Most children will have been out of school and without routine and close contact with peers and learning spaces. Some, but not all, will have had access to digital learning.

Say, for example:

- *"Some students will have witnessed their caregivers' increased anxiety, tension and exhaustion. As a result, their mental health and wellbeing could be at risk. Space to discuss these challenges among their peers and to share their experiences with the*

*guidance of a trusted adult, will support students to process the effects of the crisis and the various consequences."*

- ➔ Explain that today they will learn how to run a 90–120-minute check-in session with children aged six and up when they first come back to school or another activity space that has been closed due to conflict.  
Say, for example:
  - *"This check-in session aims to support children to process their experiences of crisis or conflict to help prevent longer-term negative effects on their psychosocial development. As an educator, you play an important role in children's lives, and can provide stability, comfort and reassurance. Through your everyday support, you can help children to adapt and resume life after their lives have been disrupted by displacement and other distressing events."*
- ➔ Explain the benefits of a check-in with children:
  - As a supportive adult, you will gain insight into how children are feeling about returning to school and what they need to feel safe and supported.
  - You will have the opportunity to put children at ease, listen, provide encouragement and normalize their experiences.
  - You will have the opportunity to observe whether any children need extra attention and support.
  - You will use play-based approaches to discuss how the conflict has affected children and promote hope for the future.

<sup>6</sup> This session is based on the *Let's Talk About It: Check-in Guide* developed by the MHPSS Collaborative and Save the Children: <https://mhpscollaborative.org/resources/lets-talk-about-it-check-in-guidance/>.



- Students will:
  - have the opportunity to reflect and strengthen self-awareness as they share their experiences
  - get the chance to understand their reactions to and feelings about their experiences, which will help them to manage their emotions
  - be able to see that they are not alone and that their peers had similar experiences
  - know that they are supported and gain an understanding of the resources available to them.

➔ This session includes a script for a 90–120-minute partially structured “check-in” conversation after the children have returned to school in person. The aim is to understand how they have been affected by the war or conflict and to reduce anxiety, sadness or confusion. These basic skills can also be used to speak with students about other types of crisis they might have experienced.

➔ Explain that the check-in session has six steps that will be discussed in detail later. Write them on a flip chart or PowerPoint slide.

1. Introduce the session: how much time will be spent on the check-in, how it will be done and its purpose.
2. How has the conflict or crisis affected you, your families and your communities?
3. What has helped you while you haven’t been able to come to school?

4. What are you looking forward to?
5. What are you nervous about?
6. How can we take care of one another?



Write the six steps on a PowerPoint slide.

### Adapting the check-in for different ages

Explain that educators should consider the age and developmental level of the children in their group before planning the check-in.

For example:

- **For younger children (6–8)**, they should consider shortening the session or repeating it over several days using different prompt questions or activities to give more children the chance to share their experiences and feelings. They could use play (such as P.O.W.E.R. games, including Freeze Dance, Shooting Stars, Hope is in the Air or Frozen Beanbag) to illustrate and prompt discussion. With any adaptation, they should make sure to end with Step 6 – how to take care of one another.
- **Older children (12–18)** should be given more time and space to discuss what they’re learning about the conflict and any worries or queries they may have. Expressing their feelings and experiences through writing in a journal or drawing could be particularly helpful for this age group.



## How to support children while speaking about crisis




1 hour



Flipcharts, markers, pens



Small groups, whole group, role plays

- ➔ Explain that in this activity, participants will brainstorm tips that educators can use when speaking with students about conflict or crisis.
- ➔ Break participants into three or four groups (depending on the size of the whole group). Ask them to write the tips they've brainstormed on a flipchart and prepare a short roleplay to demonstrate them to the whole group.
- ➔ Bring all the groups back together and invite them to demonstrate each of the tips they brainstormed.
  -  Divide participants into virtual breakout rooms and ask them to type their list on a virtual board. They can either roleplay virtually or read out their list.
- ➔ If any of the tips below weren't mentioned, discuss them and ask volunteers to demonstrate how they would be applied in a classroom.
  - Acknowledge when a child shares, for example by making eye contact and thanking them for their contribution. Make sure that anyone who wishes to get the chance to say something.

Dividing the students into smaller groups can help those who are shy to feel more comfortable, but don't put pressure on anyone to share.

- You can give general examples about your own experiences of the conflict if you've also lived through it but use only broad statements, such as, "I missed seeing everyone at school. What about you?" It's important that students remain the focus of the conversation.
  - Use normalization and generalization statements to support the children. We'll look at good examples of how to do this later in this session.
  - If there are students who are new to the school or the area (because they've been displaced), make a special effort to make them feel included and supported.
- ➔ Explain to participants that, as an educator, they will often be the first person to notice that a child may be in distress. They can be a supportive adult who can help to calm, comfort and stabilize the child. There are a number of ways in which to do this. Speak softly, slowly and calmly.
- Say, for example:
- *"Try to sit down next to the child or crouch down so that you're at the same level as them. If appropriate in your culture, maintain eye or physical contact, such as holding the child's hand or placing your arm around their shoulder. But always ask first if they feel comfortable with physical contact. If the child is panicking or seems disoriented, encourage them to focus on non-distressing things in the immediate environment. For*



*example, try to shift their attention to something they can see or hear, such as the colour of the room or the sounds in the environment. Ask them to focus on their breathing and encourage them to breathe deeply and slowly. You can make this playful by showing them how to breathe deeply like a cat or a lion, or their favourite animal. You could even make animal sounds!"*

➔ Explain that it's always important to practise active listening when speaking with a child in distress or with children about crisis or conflict. Ask participants to demonstrate examples of how they practise active listening and write these on a flipchart. When finished, add any of the following that weren't mentioned:

- Show that you're listening by nodding, smiling and using facial expressions.
- Paraphrase what the child said and repeat it back to them to show that you've understood them correctly.
- Encourage the child to talk if they want to.
- Respond to what the child tells you without judgement.
- Observe non-verbal cues and mirror them, if appropriate.

➔ Ask a participant to volunteer to play the role of a student. You, the facilitator, will play the role of the teacher and act out the opposite of active listening.

For example: Not holding eye contact, looking at your phone while the child is speaking with you, or interrupting them, etc.

➔ Ask participants to reflect on what poor listening skills were demonstrated.

➔ Break participants into pairs and invite each pair to choose one partner to play the teacher and the other to play the student.

➔ Ask participants playing the teacher/educator to practise using active listening skills for two minutes in a scenario where the student is sharing their experiences of conflict.

➔ After two minutes, ask the participants to switch roles so that each can practise active listening skills.



Divide participants into pairs in breakout rooms and ask them to practise active listening skills with their partner.

➔ Ask participants to think of a time when they shared something with a friend/family member/teacher who didn't actively listen to them. How did that make them feel compared with in the role play where they practised active listening. Ask participants to share their answers.

➔ Explain that it's also important when speaking with children about conflict or other crises to respond in a supportive and caring way and to use normalization and generalization statements to support them. Normalization statements are used to let the child know that they're having a normal reaction to a distressing event and that everyone experiences distress and adversity differently. Generalization statements let the child know that many other children share the same feelings and that they are not alone.



➔ Review the use of normalization and generalization statements when speaking to children about crisis and conducting the check-in session.

Say, for example:

- *“Normalization and generalization statements aren’t meant to ignore or dismiss what a child experiencing difficult emotions is expressing. Rather, they help the child to understand that they aren’t alone, and that the feelings they’re experiencing are common. The key point is that the child knows that their reactions are understandable and human. Normalization and generalization statements can also help to protect the child from saying anything they may regret later. Diving deep into emotions is not always useful, especially in a non-clinical setting or outside a close, trusting relationship.”*

➔ Share the following examples of normalization and generalization statements on a flip chart. Explain that statements like “you’ll be fine” should be avoided.



Write the examples in a PowerPoint presentation.

Normalization statements:

- *“Living through a crisis can bring lots of difficult emotions. You may feel stressed and overwhelmed by everything that’s happening around you. It can be difficult to deal with these feelings, to communicate them to others, and to ask for help.”*
- *“Many of us who’ve experienced bombings, sniper attacks or other forms of violence [substitute with examples appropriate*

*to the context of your training] can feel relieved and even happy that we’re safe, but very confused, sad and scared at the same time. It’s not easy to experience so many emotions at the same time, but it’s perfectly normal, and it’s because of what happened.”*

Generalization statements:

- *“I’m so sorry that happened, it must be very difficult. Any child who hasn’t heard from their father [or other family member] for a long time will be very worried and may also have sleeping difficulties like yours.”*
- *“I know many children who found the first months very difficult, but who are now doing much better...”*

➔ Break participants into three or four groups (depending on the size of the whole group) and ask them to come up with two normalization statements and two generalization statements that are appropriate when speaking with children about crisis.



Divide participants into virtual breakout rooms and type the normalization and generalization statements they come up with on a virtual board.

➔ Ask participants to share the statements they came up with and correct any that might be making false or empty promises that can’t be kept or that don’t take into account the child’s concerns.

Examples of false promises: *“Everything will change soon.”*  
*“The war will be over soon.”*



## How to run a check-in session in your classroom



1 hour



Paper, markers, Handout 10: Let's Talk About It:  
Check-in guidance



Whole group

- ➔ Explain that now you will facilitate a complete check-in session with each participant adopting the role of a student in their classroom. They can use this session to check in and discuss adverse events affecting the community even if children are not returning to school.
- ➔ Explain how much time should be spent on the conversation, how it will be conducted and its purpose (10 minutes). It's important to stick to the schedule and to limit the conversation to 90–120 minutes to get through all the steps and keep everyone's attention.
- ➔ Start the check-in session by singing a short song together or playing an interactive game as an ice breaker (e.g., use age-appropriate social or emotional development P.O.W.E.R. games).  
Say, for example:
  - *"Welcome back, it's great to see you! I've been really looking forward to it and hope you have too. It's been an unusual time and for some of us it's been very difficult. So, we'll spend the next hour or so talking about how things have been in our community, how we ourselves have been, and how we can*

*help each other adjust to being back together in our class or activities."*

- ➔ Go through the basic rules or get participants to suggest and agree on them (if possible, write them on the board or flipchart). For the training, you can use the ground rules agreed at the start of the training (in the Introduction).

For example:

- There are no right or wrong answers – we respect everyone's opinion.
- We don't laugh at each other.
- We let each other talk and we listen to one another.
- You don't have to say anything if you don't feel like it.

Ask if there are other ideas for ground rules.

### 1. How has the crisis affected them, their families and communities?

(10–15 minutes)

- ➔ This part has two steps. First, talk about how the crisis has and continues to affect their lives, then how it has made them feel. The key is for students to understand the connection between what has happened and the feelings they've had because of it.
- ➔ If a student shares something difficult, use techniques such as generalization or normalization. Say, for example: *"Yes, I'm sure there are many others who have felt the same."*



➡ Start by saying, for example:

*"The conflict has affected everyone in one way or another – children, adults and young people. Now let's talk about how it has and continues to affect our lives."*

➡ Focus on events and give some examples:

- We haven't been able to go to school.
- Schools were shut down.
- Many of us have been separated from our loved ones and this makes us anxious or feel guilty.
- Our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters had to become our teachers or help us with our schoolwork.
- Our community has come together, and we've experienced great generosity.

➡ If many children have been displaced or buildings destroyed, give these examples:

- We've had to leave our homes, villages and towns to be safe.
- Our schools, homes and/or communities have been destroyed.

➡ Ask for examples and acknowledge all those given.

➡ Then ask about how these experiences have made them feel.

Say, for example:

- *"We've seen a lot more news online and on TV that has made us worried."*

➡ Ask children to draw or act out how the events made them or people in their community feel. Prepare drawings representing sadness, anger, confusion, etc., or ask the children themselves to draw the various feelings they've named. (Make sure to ask them to draw the feelings and not the situation.)

➡ End this part of the conversation by emphasizing that their reactions are normal, and that how they feel is connected to how their lives have been affected by the war. Remind participants that it is often helpful to discuss feelings and thoughts of being scared or sad with others and to encourage children to talk to someone they trust.

➡ If students are hesitant to share, switch the exercise around. Instead of asking them for input, provide a list of common events and the feelings associated with them and ask if anyone recognizes these in themselves or within their community. It may be easier for children to recognize feelings they've experienced, rather than to name their feelings.

Say, for example:

- *"I had to leave my home and we could only take what we could carry with us. I wasn't sure where we were going or if I would ever see my home again, which made me feel sad."*

Or:

- *"I was in a bomb shelter with my grandmother and brother. When the bombing ended, I felt so relieved."*





## 2. What has helped while schools have been closed?

(5–10 minutes)

- ➔ This part of the conversation is a brainstorm on the strategies that have worked well for the students. They can start by talking together in pairs.
- ➔ Ask them to help make a list of what has helped them feel better during the crisis and to role play or draw their responses as a group or in smaller groups. Provide some examples:
  - Talking or texting with a friend or loved one they're separated from
  - Playing with their siblings
  - Asking for support
  - Supporting others
  - Making new friends in communal centres or temporary homes.
- ➔ Give examples of other ways people in the community have helped themselves to feel better during the crisis.
- ➔ Consider practising slow breathing as a group, which is one way to help students (and/or you) feel calm. In a calm slow voice, say and demonstrate:
  - *"Put both hands gently on your bellies and sit up straight but relaxed. If it feels comfortable, close your eyes or, if that feels better, look towards the ground. Now let's breathe in slowly and feel our bellies fill with air and get nice and round. Now, slowly breathe out and feel our bellies get small again."*
- ➔ Count from one to five slowly while you breathe in and then back down from five to one as you breathe out. Repeat four times, then ask the students how they feel and share how you're feeling too.

## 3. What are we looking forward to?

(10–15 minutes)

- ➔ The purpose of this step is to support children to think positively about returning to school and strengthen the sense of community in the classroom.
 

Say, for example:

  - *"Many children are really looking forward to seeing their friends and going back to learning together. What are you, or other students you know, looking forward to most about returning to school?"*
- ➔ If students are already back in school, ask them about their hopes for the future. This gives them an opportunity to verbalize their positive expectations and hear what their peers are excited about. This can be turned into a playful activity by dividing the students into small groups and asking each group to develop a role play demonstrating what they're looking forward to. Alternatively, small groups of students can draw posters illustrating their hopes to hang on the classroom walls.

## 4. What might we be nervous about?

(5–10 minutes)

- ➔ Remind participants that many students are nervous about coming back to school or rejoining other activities. Some will be wondering whether their friends are still their friends, some will be afraid of being away from their family, and some will be worried about having fallen behind at school. For some, it will be like their first day at a new school, with butterflies in their stomach. Ask participants if they can relate with any of these feelings.



Say, for example:

- *"It's important to know and talk about what we're nervous about. You can ask for help and together we'll find the best way to help and care for one another."*

## 5. How can we take care of one another?

(20–30 minutes)

➔ Start by saying, for example:

- *"We can all help to take care of ourselves and each other. I'm sure you've seen examples of how communities have come together to support one another since the conflict started."*

➔ Give examples of practices that will help students feel supported:

- Welcoming new students who may have been displaced
- Supporting new students to orient themselves to the new school environment (i.e., where things are located, how the school functions, etc.)
- Supporting one another with difficult emotions and feelings
- Being kind and supportive to one another.

➔ Encourage students to ask questions about the practices above.

➔ Then ask them: "What will it take for us all to start off well?"

Say, for example:

- *"Be patient with yourself and one another. Pay special attention in case anyone is feeling left out and be sure to include them. Tell an adult (preferably use a specific name) if you're upset or see others who are upset."*

➔ Ask students to create posters or leaflets (depending on the supplies available) with drawings or keywords showing how they're going to take care of themselves and each other and their difficult feelings and thoughts. Encourage children to create a song, drama or theatre production that can be put on for others.

➔ End on a positive note and say that all the adults are looking forward to helping everyone have a good time at school and that it will be great to get started.

➔ There may be students who need extra support or additional services. Before the check-in session, be aware of what services exist, how children can access them and how to refer children to these services if needed. After the session, and in following weeks, continue to monitor the group and identify and refer children who are particularly distressed or in need of additional support or specialized care.

➔ Give participants the opportunity to ask questions and share how they feel about running the check-in session in their classroom/virtual classroom.

➔ Provide participants with Handout 10: Welcome Back Check-in Guidance.



## Conclusion



10 minutes



Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios, markers and pens



Whole group review, individual drawing/writing

➔ Recap what you've learned (ask questions of the group or invite one or two participants to provide a recap).

- Active listening skills
- Normalization and generalization statements
- How to facilitate a check-in session with students



Invite participants to take five minutes to add notes in their Classroom Wellbeing Portfolio.

- What two normalization and generalization statements do they want to remember?
- Write up a plan of how the check-in session will be used in their classroom.

