

Teaching and learning activities

to support students and teachers during times of crisis



Introduction

When children and young people are involved in or witness adversity in the form of a natural disaster or a national or global crisis, they may feel a loss of control or a feeling of being overwhelmed. This might result in students having difficulties in coping with the challenges of everyday life including; social and academic performance, mental health, and the keeping up of daily routines including sleeping and exercising.

As an educator, you are in a unique position to help contribute to a sense of safety through familiar routines and environments, which can give children and young people the stability they need to manage their emotional responses and reconnect with their community. As the state of the world rapidly evolves it can seem difficult to escape ongoing media bulletins reporting on natural disasters, crises or other traumatic events. For children and young people this can be especially upsetting as they are more sensitive to ‘scary’ news, and as a result, are likely to require support to help them understand and cope with what is happening.

Using this guide

To support educators during uncertain and unprecedented times, Australia Post has created this teacher guide. Within this teacher guide you will find a collection of teaching and learning activities specifically designed to assist students in processing their feelings around natural disasters and other crises that may promote a feeling of uncertainty and concern. As an extension of the Australia Post Pen Pal Club Program, the learning activities feature letter writing as an outlet for sharing thoughts and ideas to help students navigate their feelings of uncertainty, and an opportunity for practising and expressing gratitude to those who support us through adversity.

The suggested activities within this teacher guide are suitable for students aged 5-13 years, and link to the Australian Curriculum for Health and Physical Education, and English.

Please note that this is not a clinical resource. For immediate crisis support please contact Emergency Services on 000 or the mental health support service, Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

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Supporting yourself during a crisis

To help your students in recovering emotionally from adversity, it is essential that you position yourself as a consistent and reliable force in their lives. In doing this, it is important to note that it is challenging for you to sustain your day-to-day role as an educator while also providing the safe and secure environment that children and young people need during times of uncertainty. It can be easy to forget that your own wellbeing is equally important. To support your own mental health needs, try to maintain the routines that work well for you such as getting enough sleep, eating healthily and appropriate exercise habits. For more information on supporting educator wellbeing, please see the **Further Reading** section on page 9 of this guide.

Behaviours you might see in students struggling to cope with trauma

When children and young people are involved in, witness, or hear about a traumatic event in the news, they may 'act out' or behave differently as they attempt to navigate their complicated and uncertain emotions. These changes in behaviour are different for each student, but some signs to look out for might include:

- Becoming more clingy around a particular trusted adult such as a parent, family member or other guardian.
- Tantrums or outbursts, acting younger than their age and increased irritability. Because children and young people are already overwhelmed, they are more sensitive to smaller issues due to their heightened emotions.
- Finding it difficult to focus in class or experience low energy levels as a result of sleeping inconsistencies.
- Students might also discuss topics such as death and dying more regularly as they seek to understand what is happening around them.

Supporting students struggling to cope with trauma

Below are a few strategies you can use to support students during a crisis or post-trauma, however, **for immediate crisis support contact Emergency Services on 000 or the Beyond Blue Support Service on 1300 22 4636.**

- Help your students to understand what is happening. Explain to them that it is normal to feel scared or worried, and encourage them to ask questions.
- Be proactive in ensuring that you are up-to-date with the latest information so you can answer students' questions. For older students, direct them to reputable sources where they can access information for themselves.
- Reassure your students by reminding them that they are safe with you. Create a safe, secure space to learn and relax where possible.
- Focus on and celebrate the people who are helping in crisis, such as doctors and nurses, emergency response teams and more.
- Your students may mirror your own reactions, so it can help to share your own feelings in a positive manner and explain to students how you are managing any feelings of uncertainty.



Teaching and learning activities

Years Foundation - 2



Overview

In Years Foundation - 2, students will explore the value of gratitude in times of adversity by celebrating the people who help and support others throughout a disaster or crisis. To do this students will examine what gratitude feels like, how gratitude can spread joy, and how the contributions of 'everyday heroes' allow us to rebuild and reconnect in times of tragedy. Below you will find a selection of learning activities to support you in exploring these concepts with your students, as well other suggested activities that can continue to foster a culture of gratitude within your classroom.

Australian Curriculum Links

Foundation

English

- Listen to and respond orally to texts and to the communication of others in informal and structured classroom situations (ACELY1646)

Health and Physical Education

- Identify people and demonstrate protective behaviours and other actions that help keep themselves safe and healthy (ACPPS003)

Year 1

English

- Create short imaginative and informative texts that show emerging use of appropriate text structure, sentence-level grammar, word choice, spelling, punctuation and appropriate multimodal elements, for example illustrations and diagrams (ACELY1661)

Health and Physical Education

- Practise strategies they can use when they feel uncomfortable, unsafe or need help with a task, problem or situation (ACPPS017)
- Recognise situations and opportunities to promote health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS018)

Year 2



English

- Create short imaginative, informative and persuasive texts using growing knowledge of text structures and language features for familiar and some less familiar audiences, selecting print and multimodal elements appropriate to the audience and purpose (ACELY1671)

Health and Physical Education

- Practise strategies they can use when they feel uncomfortable, unsafe or need help with a task, problem or situation (ACPPS017)
- Recognise situations and opportunities to promote health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS018)

General capabilities

-  Literacy
-  Personal and Social Capability

Introductory Activity

Bring the class together as a group and discuss the question '**What is a hero?**'. Invite students to share the characteristics of their favourite superheroes such as super strength, kindness, intelligence and bravery. Together, identify people within the community who also possess these characteristics; such as healthcare workers, parents and teachers, and emergency service crews. Ask students how they could express their gratitude to these people, and explain that they will have the chance today to write a letter of gratitude to these people.

Main Activity

1. Explain to your students that in times of disaster or crisis there are people who risk themselves for our safety. Further explore this idea by reviewing the efforts of firefighters during the Australian Bushfires of the Summer of 2019/2020.
2. With a partner, invite students to share their own experiences of a time where they were going through a tough time related to a natural disaster or other crisis. Ask each student to identify the people who helped them in this time such as; parents, friends, family members, doctors, nurses, first responders, etc.
3. As a class, create a mindmap of what students would like to say to their 'everyday heroes'. Encourage students to consider ways in which they would like to express their gratitude or say thank you.
4. Using the class mindmap and their own experiences, ask each student to choose someone that they would like to say thank you to who has supported them or their family, and begin drafting their letter of gratitude. For more information on writing and addressing a letter, and to access relevant templates please go to auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
5. If appropriate, ask students to share their letter with a partner for peer review, or review the letter yourself and provide feedback to each student. Templates for peer feedback are also available at auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
6. Collect completed and addressed letters and post them to students' 'everyday heroes'.

Concluding Activity

Challenge the class to consider how they have been inspired by their 'everyday heroes' and how these heroes support the community in times of tragedy. Using sticky notes, invite each student to write down how they are going to be an 'everyday hero' themselves and contribute their ideas to a class display.

Supporting and Extension Activities

- Challenge students to draft a script for an interview with their chosen 'everyday hero'. Remind students to consider what kind of questions they would want to ask their hero, as well as which questions might be interesting for an audience.
- Using pillows, soft colours, and books create a relaxation space in the classroom where students can unwind if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Invite students to create a 'superhero profile' for their chosen 'everyday hero'. Encourage students to consider what their hero's superhero outfit would look like, what their name would be, and what their superpower would be and draw a picture illustrating this.
- Establish a culture of gratitude in your classroom by practising daily gratitude sessions. This could be done through meditation, journalling or a class discussion.



Teaching and learning activities

Years 3 - 4



Overview

In Years 3 - 4, students will explore the value of gratitude in times of adversity by celebrating the people who help and support others throughout a disaster or crisis, and examine how the contributions of these people allow them to remain safe and supported. To do this, students will research a range of campaigns and social media movements that thank these people, and consider how they could support these movements themselves, before drafting and sending a letter of gratitude to someone who helped them throughout a disaster or crisis. Below you will find a selection of learning activities to support you in exploring these concepts with your students, as well other suggested activities that can continue to foster a culture of gratitude within your classroom.

Australian Curriculum Links

Year 3

English

- Listen to and contribute to conversations and discussions to share information and ideas and negotiate in collaborative situations (ACELY1676)
- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts demonstrating increasing control over text structures and language features and selecting print, and multimodal elements appropriate to the audience and purpose (ACELY1682)

Health and Physical Education

- Identify and practise strategies to promote health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS036)

Year 4

English



- Use interaction skills such as acknowledging another's point of view and linking students' response to the topic, using familiar and new vocabulary and a range of vocal effects such as tone, pace, pitch and volume to speak clearly and coherently (ACELY1688)

- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts containing key information and supporting details for a widening range of audiences, demonstrating increasing control over text structures and language features (ACELY1694)

Health and Physical Education

- Identify and practise strategies to promote health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS036)

General capabilities

-  Literacy
-  Personal and Social Capability

Introductory Activity

Lead the class in a guided meditation focusing on gratitude. Invite students to find a place in the space where they can sit or lie down comfortably and close their eyes. Ask students to slow their breathing and clear their minds. Once students are settled, ask them to envision a person that they are grateful for. This person should be someone who has helped them navigate a disaster or crisis; it could be a friend or family member, a medical worker, or even a first responder. Invite students to envision sending gratitude to the person they have selected, before bringing the class together again.

Main Activity

1. Explain to your students that in times of disaster or crisis, there are people who risk themselves for our own safety. Further explore this idea by reviewing the movements that have celebrated these people such as the #StayAtHome movement during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak.
2. Invite students to share their own experiences of a time where they were going through a tough time related to a natural disaster or other crisis with a partner. Ask each student to identify a person who helped them in this time; such as parents, friends, family members, doctors, nurses, emergency crews, etc.
3. Challenge each student to create a visual representation of their gratitude to their chosen person. Encourage students to think back to the meditation to help them in this task.
4. Ask each student to draft a letter to their chosen person that expresses their gratitude and thanks. Within this letter, invite students to include how this person has inspired them to support others and themselves. For more information on writing and addressing a letter, and to access relevant templates please go to auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
5. If appropriate, ask students to share their letter with a partner for peer review, or review the letter yourself and provide feedback to each student. Templates for peer feedback are also available at auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
6. Collect completed and addressed letters and post them to students' chosen people.

Concluding Activity

Invite the class to consider how their chosen person has inspired them. Using this inspiration as a base, ask students to create a 3-point plan around how they will support others in the future and share this plan with either a partner or with you.

Supporting and Extension Activities

- Challenge students to write a short, newspaper-style article that focuses on and celebrates the contributions of their chosen person during a disaster or crisis. Invite students to illustrate their article wherever possible.
- Using pillows, soft colours and books, create a relaxation space in the classroom where students can unwind if they are feeling overwhelmed. Encourage students to create these spaces at home also through the use of meditation and wellbeing apps that are age-appropriate.
- Invite students to create a short comic that features their chosen person as the main character. Challenge students to explore this person's contributions within their comic by taking an origin-story angle to the comic.
- Establish a culture of gratitude in your classroom by practising daily gratitude sessions. This could be done through meditation, journalling or a class discussion.



Teaching and learning activities

Years 5 - 6



Overview

In Years 5 - 6, students will explore the value of gratitude in times of adversity by celebrating the people who help and support others throughout a disaster or crisis, and taking steps to pay forward this kindness and bravery in their own lives. To do this, students will identify a person who has assisted them or others during a disaster or crisis and consider what they can learn from that person, before drafting and sending a letter of gratitude to their chosen person. Below you will find a selection of learning activities to support you in exploring these concepts with your students, as well other suggested activities that can continue to foster a culture of gratitude within your classroom.

Australian Curriculum Links

Year 5

English

- Clarify understanding of content as it unfolds in formal and informal situations, connecting ideas to students' own experiences and present and justify a point of view (ACELY1699)
- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive print and multimodal texts, choosing text structures, language features, images and sound appropriate to purpose and audience (ACELY1704)

Health and Physical Education

- Investigate community resources and ways to seek help about health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS053)

Year 6

English



- Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions (ACELY1709)

- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, choosing and experimenting with text structures, language features, images and digital resources appropriate to purpose and audience (ACELY1714)

Health and Physical Education

- Investigate community resources and ways to seek help about health, safety and wellbeing (ACPPS053)

General capabilities

-  Literacy
-  Personal and Social Capability

Introductory Activity

As a class, explore the statement '***I want to help the world by ...***' by inviting each student to share how they want to help heal and support the world during times of disaster, tragedy or crisis. Following this discussion, ask students to identify people who have helped others during a disaster or crisis and that they consider to be inspirational. Invite students to share their thoughts with a partner. Explain that today the class will get the opportunity to identify someone who inspires them and write a letter to that person explaining why they are grateful for their person's contributions, and how their actions have inspired them to help the world.

Main Activity

1. Explain to your students that in times of disaster or crisis, there are people who risk themselves for our own safety. Further explore this idea by reviewing the efforts of healthcare professionals during a pandemic such as the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.
2. Invite students to share their own experiences of a time where they were going through a tough time related to a natural disaster or other crisis with a partner. Ask each student to identify a person who helped them in this time; such as parents, friends, family members, doctors, nurses, first responders, etc.
3. Ask each student to consider how that person has inspired them to help the world. Invite students to create a vision board that shows how they intend to help heal and support the world in times of tragedy, disaster or crisis; be it through their career choice, acts of kindness, or other avenues.
4. Using their vision boards, challenge each student to draft a letter to their chosen person that expresses their gratitude and thanks. Within this letter, students may include; why they are grateful for this person's actions; how this person has inspired them to help the world in times of adversity; and share their hopes for how they might channel similar kindness and bravery in the future. For more information on writing and addressing a letter, and to access relevant templates please go to auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
5. If appropriate, ask students to share their letter with a partner for peer review, or review the letter yourself and provide feedback to each student. Templates for peer feedback are also available at auspost.com.au/penpalclub.
6. Collect completed and addressed letters and post them to students' chosen people, or invite students to complete this task.

Concluding Activity

As a class, share a range of words and phrases that symbolise their chosen inspirational people. Generate a class display of these contributions using a word cloud generator website or other digital technology.

Supporting and Extension Activities

- Challenge students to create a mock-up for a social media page belonging to their chosen person. If possible, ask students to include the pictures, dates and places.
- Using pillows, soft colours and books, create a relaxation space in the classroom where students can unwind if they are feeling overwhelmed. Encourage students to create these spaces at home also through the use of meditation and wellbeing apps that are age-appropriate, as well as create and maintain a personal wellbeing plan.
- Challenge students to create a mock-up of a book cover for their chosen inspirational person's biography. Remind students to think about what the biography might be titled as well as how the cover will look.
- Establish a culture of gratitude in your classroom by practising daily gratitude sessions. This could be done through meditation, journalling or a class discussion.



Professional Development

We strongly encourage teachers looking for additional information or support to access the Be You Program (<https://beyou.edu.au/>) which can support educators, families and community members to help manage the mental health impact of tragedies, natural disasters and other crises.

Further Reading

- Beyond Blue. (2019). Changes in kids behaviour after seeing scary stuff in the news. Accessible at <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/personal-best/pillar/supporting-others/changes-in-kids-behaviour-after-seeing-scary-stuff-in-the-news>.
- Beyond Blue (2019). Talking to kids about scary stuff in the news. Accessible at <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/personal-best/pillar/supporting-others/talking-to-kids-about-scary-stuff-in-the-news>.
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- Be You (2020). Supporting children and young people who have experienced trauma. Accessible at <https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/grief-trauma-and-critical-incidents/supporting-children-and-young-people-who-have-experienced-trauma>.
- Be You (2020). Impact of natural disasters on mental health. Accessible at <https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/grief-trauma-and-critical-incidents/impact-of-natural-disasters-on-mental-health>.

