

In grades primary to six, difficult history may come up during learning experiences about contemporary or historical events, and around days or months used to commemorate and validate the experiences of various groups, or in response to students' questions about historic or current events.

What is difficult history?

Difficult history can be defined as history that includes oppression, violence, or trauma. Examples include: residential school experiences, Holocaust education, enslavement, armed conflicts, terrorism, and historical and contemporary experiences of racism and other kinds of discrimination. Learning about difficult histories often evokes strong emotional responses. Teaching about difficult history must take the age of the students into account to ensure that the learning experiences and resources selected are **developmentally appropriate**.

*Learning experiences and resources that are **developmentally appropriate** consider the cognitive, social, and emotional development of students. Stages of development vary by individual, but teachers can use the guidance in this document to support teaching and resource selection that is appropriate for the grade(s) they teach.*

Why teach difficult history?

Teaching difficult history provides opportunities to:

- ensure that important stories and perspectives are remembered,
- validate and affirm the experiences of various communities,
- connect past events to current contexts, where appropriate,
- consider developmentally appropriate ways to promote social and cultural diversity and inclusion.

Developmentally Appropriate Approaches?

When designing learning experiences, or facilitating conversations in response to students' questions, it is important to consider what is developmentally appropriate for students. In early grades, learning should focus on ways to foster and promote healthy and safe relationships, and ways to respect and include everyone to provide opportunities to develop empathy for others. In later grades, learning can continue to develop these concepts and begin to engage students in conversations about the effects of discrimination and stereotypes as well as the resilience demonstrated by historical figures and groups.

Safe Learning Environments

Creating a classroom culture that recognizes and values all students' identities and provides opportunities for students to explore identities that are different from their own is essential to fostering a safe learning environment. When planning learning experiences, you can:

- take time to reflect on your own identity and positionality in relationship to these histories,
- co-create a classroom collective agreement that outlines expectations for you and your students,
- support students in understanding what difficult history is, and that experiencing difficult emotions in response to the learning is a normal reaction,
- introduce various ways that students can process their emotions with support.

Facilitating Discussion

When discussing difficult history, set expectations that lead to balanced, respectful conversations. It is important to model what balanced, respectful conversation looks like in your classroom. People today are not responsible for decisions made in the past, but it is important to acknowledge that decisions made in the past can have profound impacts today, especially on the lives of racialized and marginalized people. When facilitating classroom discussions:

- remind students about respectful communication
- find out what students already know
- Respond to questions in a developmentally appropriate way - the aim is not to worry students with upsetting details but to protect them from misinformation they may have heard, or disturbing images they may have seen on television or the internet
- normalize and support students' emotional responses - students need to know it's okay to feel sad or angry when learning about difficult history
- lead students in reflecting

Providing Time for Processing and Reflecting

Students need time to process, reflect, and debrief what they have learned. Some children may not be ready to speak about what they have heard right away. You can provide opportunities for students to process and reflect by:

- checking in with students at the end of the lesson and the following day to give them opportunities to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions
- following conversations about difficult history with Health Education lessons about coping strategies to deal with difficult emotions
- providing opportunities for outlets such as drawing, painting, journaling, playing music, physical movement, and outside play to help students process their +emotions

Resource Selection

Choosing resources to support learning about difficult history requires careful consideration. It is essential that teachers review resources before using them with students. Below are questions to guide your resource selection:

- Does the resource align with curriculum outcomes?
- Does the resource pass the [Bias Evaluation Instrument](#)?
- Is the resistance and resilience of the people affected reflected in the resource? If not, how can I introduce resources that do?
- Is this resource developmentally appropriate?

When selecting short term resources such as news articles and videos, please consult: "[Guidance for Selecting Short Term Learning Resources.](#)"

Difficult History: Developmentally Appropriate Resource Selection

Careful selection of resources provides opportunities for students to gain knowledge and understanding of historic and current issues facing our communities. It's critical when selecting resources to balance stories of injustice with stories that normalize and celebrate various experiences, identities, and cultures.

Grades Primary to 2: When selecting resources, teachers need to:

Choose resources that:	Avoid resources that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promote healthy friendship and peer relationships alongside opportunities for discussion provide opportunities to discuss ways we can respect and include everyone provide positive representations of people and families from various backgrounds, experiences, and identities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> portray violence or aggression, including violent imagery or acts of discrimination reinforce stereotypes include inappropriate language such as slurs or hate speech include traumatic experiences such as children being separated from parents or other family members, abuse, or the results of conflict or terrorism, especially disturbing images portray individuals or groups as victims without agency or hope

Grades 3 to 4: When selecting resources, teachers need to:

Choose resources that:	Avoid resources that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promote healthy relationships by demonstrating how to care for self and others, and include ways to solve problems in relationships when they occur provide opportunities to discuss ways we can respect and include others provide positive representations of people and families from various backgrounds, experiences, and identities portray various ways historical figures responded to injustice or adversity provide opportunities to discuss the positive and negative consequences of choices and actions and how one's decisions can impact others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> portray violence, aggression, or discrimination without consequences describe scenes of graphic violence, including visuals such as images or videos reinforce stereotypes include inappropriate language such as slurs or hate speech include traumatic experiences such as children being forcibly separated from parents or other family members, abuse, or the results of conflict or terrorism, especially disturbing images portray individuals or groups as victims without agency or hope

Grades 5 to 6: When selecting resources, teachers need to:

Choose resources that:	Avoid resources that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> begin to introduce moral and ethical questions include positive representations of social differences and offer insight into conditions experienced by various groups portray various ways historical figures responded to injustice or adversity provide opportunities to discuss the positive and negative consequences of choices and actions and how one's decisions can impact others begin to introduce historical contexts of violence, including violence experienced by particular social groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> portray violence, aggression, or discrimination without consequences describe scenes of graphic violence, including visuals such as images or videos reinforce stereotypes include inappropriate language such as slurs or hate speech include traumatic experiences such as children being forcibly separated from parents or other family members, abuse, or the results of conflict or terrorism, especially disturbing images

Difficult History: Teaching Strategies

There are evidence-based teaching strategies you can use to support your students in learning about difficult history. Strategies that are not evidence-based should be avoided. Below you will find information you can use to guide planning and instruction.

✗	Avoid starting when you are pressed for time or unable to check in the next day. Teaching difficult history involves careful preparation and scaffolding for students. Avoid starting discussions when you have limited time, such as the last lesson on a Friday.
✗	Avoid re-enactments or simulations. Re-enactments, simulations, or other ways of “acting out” difficult history are not appropriate and can be considered disrespectful to survivors and harmful to students.
✗	Avoid using humour. Using humour is not an appropriate way to ease discomfort or to attempt to lighten difficult history.
✗	Avoid singling students out. Do not ask students to share personal experiences of prejudice or discrimination based on race, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other aspects of their identities. Do not ask students to speak on behalf of a group with which they identify.
✗	Avoid romanticizing history. Portray all people as human beings who can make their own judgements and decisions. Reliable information, and a balance of perspectives is necessary for students to have an accurate understanding of the past.
✗	Avoid comparisons of oppression. Comparing the scope, depth, or impacts of suffering between groups affected by difficult events is not appropriate.
✓	Involve students, administration and families. Explain what will be discussed or shown in class and why it’s important. You can include information in your communication plan, as part of curriculum night, or other ways you communicate with students and their families.
✓	Read ahead. Read and watch everything you plan to use, or ask students to use, in class. Be judicious about websites as content can change and students can often access further information through related links.
✓	Prepare students for reactions. Explain that people respond to difficult history in different ways. Some people feel anger, guilt, shame, sadness, or defensiveness. Explain that behaviors such as laughing or joking, can be responses to feeling upset or uncomfortable and provide other ways for students to respond when they are uncomfortable.
✓	Introduce tools to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their learning and process their emotions. Encourage students to keep a reflection journal as a regular part of their learning experience or use an anonymous survey to check in on how students are feeling.
✓	Scaffold the learning experience. Provide context for learning about difficult history. Introduce historical perspectives, world views, and the events around the difficult time.
✓	Anticipate connections to today. Be aware of your students’ backgrounds – the effects of difficult history may impact their lives today. Be open if students volunteer their experience, but never single out anyone to share.
✓	Include individual stories. First-person accounts such as diaries, interviews, letters, and survivor testimonies humanize historical events and statistics so students can connect to the material.

✓	<p>Include messages of hope and resilience. After a lesson on difficult history, information on ways the community has responded in the face of injustice, or developmentally appropriate ways students themselves can become engaged in an issue helps them to see there is a way forward. Consider how to approach history in a way that is developmentally-appropriate and empowers students rather than overwhelming them.</p>
✓	<p>Choose historical fiction carefully. Historical fiction can be an effective way to humanize difficult history for students. However, teachers need to be aware that some historical fiction texts (e.g., novels, films, etc.) dramatize events with the intent of exploiting the audience’s emotional vulnerability. Choose texts that are respectful of survivors’ experiences and are developmentally-appropriate for students.</p>
✓	<p>Design creative writing assessments carefully. Creative writing can be a meaningful way for students to reflect on and communicate what they have learned. However, teachers should ensure that the assignment clearly aligns with a course outcome and that students are provided with explicit instruction to avoid appropriating the experiences of survivors and communities in their work.</p>

If you have questions or require additional support in approaching difficult history, reach out to your school administrator.

Additional Resources:

- [Approved Resources List](#)
- [Bias Evaluation Instrument](#)
- [Know the Signals: A Guide for Selecting Learning Resources that Value Black Students’ Lives](#)
- [Know the Signals FAQs](#)
- [Guidance for Selecting Short Term Learning Resources](#)
- [Tips for Teaching Difficult History](#)