

Guidelines for Teaching About the World War II and the Holocaust

Introduction to English translation

This text is a translation from Polish of "Guidelines for Teaching About the World War II and the Holocaust", created by the team from the Educational Department of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN.

The purpose of creating "Guidelines..." was to support adults looking for ways to talk to children (also quite young ones) about World War II and the Holocaust - so for parents, teachers, educators. "Guidelines..." refer to what we know from schools (which function in this particular education system), from private situations (family war stories passed on to subsequent generations), from the media (war films or information disseminated on the Internet). To a large extent, therefore, we refer to the socio-cultural context of contemporary Poland, which is, of course, completely different from the context of teaching about World War II in, for example, Israel, the USA, Germany or Russia.

Our "Guidelines..." do not pretend to be universal. We draw attention to what seems to us important on the ground of Polish educational experience. They are the fruit of our observations, reflections and questions. Some of these guidelines will certainly work with different groups, regardless of their nationality. Some of them are very close to the Polish context.

The aim of translating the following "Guidelines..." into English is to make the methodology developed by the POLIN Museum team available to people who do not speak Polish as an inspiration for their own research, as an opportunity to enter into dialogue with us, to compare what is important in different contexts of teaching about the Holocaust, and above all to provide knowledge about how we try to work with groups in Poland.

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are pleased to present recommendations and guidelines for teaching about World War II and the Holocaust, prepared by the team of the POLIN Museum Education Department.

We created them on the basis of our experiences in education, as well as the recommendations of other institutions specializing in the field. We encourage you to read the review of these aspects, which we present in more detail in a separate article.

In this document, we describe our recommended method of educating children and youth aged 6–18. The structure of the document reflects the content that we recommend for particular age groups. It is therefore divided into chapters devoted to the education of the 6–9 age group (grades 1–3 of elementary school), the 10–12 age group (grades 4–6 of elementary school), and youth over the age of 12 (grades 7–8 of elementary school and secondary school).

Each chapter contains a short description of a specific group's needs, as well as the difficulties you may encounter when teaching the discussed content. Recommendations for particular age groups are preceded by a chapter containing general remarks on all teaching concerning the subject of World War II and the Holocaust. We perceive education devoted to these matters as a process. This means that its subsequent stages should not be skipped and that guidelines concerning younger age groups are just as relevant at later stages of education. Therefore, we suggest reading the entirety of this document, regardless of the age group with which you work. For us, it is particularly important to emphasize the three dimensions of education about World War II and the Holocaust. These are:

- developing empathy and awareness
- teaching the basic history and facts of the topic
- presenting detailed information while building a frame of reference for the present.

POLIN
Museum of
the History
of Polish Jews

6 Anielewicza St.
PL-00157 Warsaw
Poland

T +48 22 471 03 00
@ polin@polin.pl

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Using the approach we propose, we demonstrate how to guide your students in the educational process through all these stages at the time and rate appropriate to them, adapting the content and methods to their age and cognitive abilities.

The guidelines and recommendations described in this document are addressed in particular to educators teaching students about World War II and the Holocaust. However, we hope that they can also support parents, guardians, and even authors—adults who wish to discuss these topics with children and youth and who are looking for guidance on how to make this process safe and educational.

Education Department, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

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Chapter 1: General remarks

The recommendations presented in this chapter refer in a general manner to teaching about World War II and the Holocaust—the role of the teacher or educator in this process, the emotional safety of children and youth, self-care, and planning the educational framework.

Ensuring emotional safety

- Teaching about World War II and the Holocaust is a difficult, emotional task that may evoke various reactions (including secondary traumatic stress). Be aware that children and youth may react to traumatic material in a way that you may find incomprehensible and surprising. For instance, a common defence mechanism in response to this material may be laughter or questions and comments that seem inappropriate given the seriousness of the subject matter.
- Causing extreme emotions, such as fear or crying, in children and youth should never happen, as it significantly blocks their cognitive processes. Developmental psychology explains what content and methods are appropriate for children and youth of particular ages. If we make ill-informed choices, our actions can have the opposite effect than intended. Exposing children to content that is educational at one stage may be harmful at another.
- Above all, ensure the emotional safety of children and youth. When planning the educational process, remember that you are addressing it to a particular person/group, so try and learn their needs as best as possible. Observe their reactions and, if necessary, modify what you had planned. Give your students space to share the emotions they feel.
- Make an informed choice of the content and teaching methods suited to the students' age. You can use solutions developed by the POLIN Museum team, designed for particular age groups. We present them in this document. However, remember that each person/group is different—adapt your methods with your

specific audience in mind (it is conceivable that with a group of sensitive 10-year-olds it would be better to work according to guidelines we prepared for 6–9-year-olds).

- Avoid reconstructing, staging, or recreating (e.g., through simulation exercises) wartime situations. This could cause students to identify with the people they roleplay—the emotion burden of the exercise cancels out its educational value.
- When using educational materials, always check what the intended age group is. Note that while a particular resource’s medium (e.g., comics, animated film, etc.) may appear to be intended for a younger audience, that will not always be the case.
- Consider how you can protect yourself and ensure your own emotional safety as a person teaching (even if only occasionally) these topics.

Planning the educational process

- Reflect on the intentions behind educational activities devoted to the topics of World War II and the Holocaust, and try to answer the following questions: What are your objectives? What are your personal motivations and experiences? In what way does this topic personally concern you and/or your students?
- Do not exploit the history of the Holocaust as means to an end—e.g., to support a political or ideological belief. Honoring the victims and survivors of the Holocaust means we understand these narratives have meaning in and of themselves.
- Take the educational context into account. For example, is your context history, human rights, or family story? Adjust your methods accordingly. If you’re discussing the war in the context of human rights, you might describe the German ordinances implemented in occupied Poland as examples of escalating human rights violations. If you’re telling your child about your grandmother’s

story of survival, you'd focus more on the emotional aspects of the story, what's important to you and your family.

Creating the proper context for teaching about World War II and the Holocaust

- Before you embark on the subject of the Holocaust with children/youth, try to introduce elements of Polish Jewish culture and prewar history. To understand the significance of the Holocaust, it is crucial to understand the role that the Jewish community played in Poland over the nine centuries prior. Furthermore, having respect for people who died in the Holocaust means we need to know not only how they died, but also how they lived and who they were, so that we do not perceive them solely as victims. It would also be advisable to include some information on contemporary Jewish life, so as not to create the false impression that Jewish culture ceased to exist after the World War II.
- Do not talk about the people persecuted and killed during the war only through the language of the persecutors (i.e., Nazi terminology), and take care when using photographic documentation and film footage— bear in mind that almost all surviving footage of the Holocaust comes from Nazi propaganda. Make sure you talk about the persecuted people using language that is respectful and takes into account their point of view (e.g., the phrase “solution to the Jewish question” is an expression used in Nazi propaganda, not by the victims or survivors).

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Chapter 2: Education in the 6–9 age group

It is of particular importance for us to emphasize that in this age group we do not teach about the Holocaust—it is not an emotionally safe topic for a young child. To prepare schoolchildren for learning about the Holocaust at later stages of their education, we can conduct activities aimed at fostering empathy. Activities fulfilling these objectives do not have to refer directly to the topic of World War II. These include, for example, activities in which we discuss texts, stories, or films that sensitize students to the pain of others or focus on such values as helping those around them and dealing with loss. In this age group we can discuss these topics in the context of the beginning of World War II. If you decide to introduce this subject in grades 1–3, below you will find recommendations on how to do it safely.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

We should remember that despite the attempt to determine certain patterns, it's common to find that children of the same age have very different paces of development. Each child develops individually, matures at a particular pace, and goes through their own socio-cultural experiences.

Educational goals

1. Teaching students how to act in accordance with values such as goodness, friendship, empathy, and justice.
2. Fostering empathic attitudes.
3. Teaching students how to bring up difficult topics in conversation, such as death, longing, and loss.
4. Developing students' sensitivity to suffering and injustice.

5. Motivating students to strive for the welfare of others.

Recommended scope of the educational content

What is crucial at this stage of education is the conversation with the child about values and difficult situations in the context of World War II, and not merely conveying historical knowledge about the war. Wartime reality is only a backdrop to the main narrative, to the topic of the conversation, which might be:

- justice and injustice
- safety and the dangerous situation
- home and the necessity to leave
- relatives and missing them
- property and its loss
- encountering violence
- searching for help and helping

Situations we discuss refer to experiences a child can understand, e.g., are related to family, friends, children's things. Talking about them helps overcome the anxieties which accompany the child at this stage of their development. If we mention wartime events directly, we should stop at the initial period of the war (gradual exclusion of the Jewish community, the beginning of the occupation). If the war narrative we present concerns Jews, it is important that it explains who Jews are and provides basic information about Jewish culture, so as not to create a situation in which Jews are associated only with the fact they were persecuted.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

The early school stage is a time of intense change from spontaneity and lack of control over their behavior to learning increasingly strong self-regulation. In this period all kinds of conversations should be easier, including subjects that are more serious and require

contemplation. It becomes possible because a child's brain becomes increasingly capable of controlling actions and reactions. Language skills and the ability to symbolize the surrounding world develop as well. Most second and third graders will be able to control their emotions to a certain extent. More consideration, seriousness, and responsibility can be expected; however, these will be accompanied by excitement and emotional engagement.

Raising social issues becomes possible, as the child's interest in the social world increases. Mentalization—i.e., the ability to understand other people's mental states—begins to develop more fully and, thus, their empathy as well. With increasing frequency children note and assess other people's behavior in terms of their intentions and not the result. Children start to understand that rules are set by people and that they can be changed, because they result from current circumstances and the context. While determining what is right and proper, they take into account the context and adapt their assessment of the situation to it.

Emotional safety

- Ensure the emotional safety of the child—make this your priority.
- If you want to bring up the subject of the war, choose a moment when the child feels emotionally stable (they are not overwhelmed by difficult life situations); moreover, do not stay on the topic too long.
- Do not look for analogies between the life of a child today and during World War II. Avoid situations where the child imagines themselves within the realities of war.
- Read books/watch films together with the child, do not leave them alone with the subject of the war.
- Create space for talking about emotions evoked in the child by the narrative/topic of the war. Help the child to name their emotions and explain them together. Show them understanding and acceptance of all emotions that

may emerge. Explain the aspects of the narrative that may evoke difficult emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, anxiety.

- If you see that the child is very sad, anxious, tense, or quite the opposite—e.g., constantly joking—learn what they need and try to provide it. Perhaps they need to vent, quiet down, or redirect their attention to something else.
- Clearly separate the past from what is going on now. The child should always know when you are talking about the past, or a fictional story, and when you discuss the present. In various ways remind the child that the war has been over for a long time and that they are safe.
- Make sure that the story has a happy ending, or at least that certain threads of the story end on a positive note.
- Make sure the story you tell provides emotional closure and ask the child what they feel about the story's ending. You can suggest making some kind of artwork. Artistic expression and activity may help the child to recover from difficult emotions stirred up by the narrative.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

Classes devoted to World War II can evoke a strong emotional response, which is why emotional closure at the end of the lesson is essential. Children of this age will probably not be able to talk about their feelings directly, so it would be much better to use another form of expression (such as arts and crafts) or to prepare activities teaching them to identify and talk about emotions before such a class. You could, for example, include visual materials like photos or illustrations of facial expressions depicting various emotions.

At this stage of development, children learn to approach important issues seriously. So when introducing the subject of war, social inequality, or suffering, we can expect children in the second or third grade to treat them seriously. Nevertheless, after the class, children may include freshly introduced subjects while they are playing (e.g., they could play war during recess). We should remember that this reaction is not an expression of ridicule or

making light of the subject, but releasing emotions that remain in children after discussing a difficult subject. At this stage of development, playing still fulfils a very important pro-developmental role. It allows them to release upsetting tension and negative emotions, and it teaches to obey rules and cooperate with others. Let us be mindful of this in order to teach while playing and through play. Let us carefully observe to see what happens when they play and what purpose playing can serve.

General teaching methodology guidelines

- Verify how the child understands the narrative you presented. If needed, fill in the gaps in their understanding.
- Devote particular attention to those moments in the narrative when protagonists might impact their own reality, when they can take action. This is how you form the child's sense of agency and do not leave them feeling helpless and overwhelmed.
- Talk with the child about what motivates characters in stories to act; try to teach them not to judge the characters, but only their actions—avoid creating a clear-cut, black-or-white image of reality.
- Give them the opportunity to process newly acquired knowledge: for example, you might encourage the child to create a poster on some aspect of the story, which would help them relieve difficult emotions arising from the subject matter

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

At this stage of development, children start to expand their pool of role models to include people outside their families. The need to identify with competent people appears—people who can be emulated and whose beliefs and knowledge they can adopt. The teacher will start to play one of these central roles, as a kind of authority and model to follow. This is why we should be mindful of what message this person conveys to children while they

teach, and what heroes and heroines (e.g., related to World War II) will be presented as role models.

Increasingly profound reflection begins to be accompanied by an understanding of irony, sarcasm, and metaphor. Nevertheless, children still prefer working on problems with only one possible solution and concrete terms. Studying many various problems and possible avenues, which requires looking at a given question from several points of view, will be a challenge (that is why we should remember to prepare narratives concerning World War II, the Holocaust, or figures therein, that students can assess without much ambiguity.) It is important to focus on concrete terms because at this stage of development children are not able to make mental operations detached from objects and images of concrete objects.

Selecting materials, language, and content

- On a book cover, look for information concerning the age group it is intended for. If you are a publisher or an author, make sure such information is visible. Note that sometimes the introduction to a book written for children is intended for adults—make sure the child does not read it.
- When selecting educational materials, do not be misled by the genre or medium (e.g., comics, animation). The form of the material may suggest it is addressed to the youngest readers or viewers, but the content itself may be too difficult.
- Before you decide whether to work with the child using a particular resource, familiarize yourself with it first. Only then decide whether the material is appropriate for the particular child (or group of children). Consider their sensitivity, experiences, and how they deal with emotions.
- Do not use materials that portray the realities of war in a drastic and direct manner.
- Do not use materials that convey too much historical information— remember that this is not the main objective at this stage of education.

- Verify how the child understands notions that appear in the narrative or your conversation. Try not to use words children might not understand (e.g., ghetto, transport, concentration camp). If you decide to introduce a new notion, explain it in a way suited to the child's age. Remember that general statements may be misconstrued by children and evoke unnecessary fear (e.g., "old people" for a 6-year-old might mean people in their thirties, the age of their parents).

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Chapter 3: Education in the 10–12 age group

In this age group, we propose you focus on conveying basic knowledge about World War II, and on organizing the information that students have already absorbed from the war's portrayal in popular culture. This is how we create the framework for further education related to this topic. At this stage, we still do not communicate detailed information about the Holocaust. However, it is important not to avoid answering questions when students ask about this aspect of the war. You can find detailed guidelines below.

Educational goals

1. Communicating basic knowledge about the history of World War II.
2. Organizing historical information, which in this period of development reaches the child haphazardly and chaotically (from television, films, the Internet, etc.).
3. Dispelling inaccurate notions of World War II based on clichés and references from popular culture.
4. Incorporating knowledge about Jews as part of learning about the history of World War II; building collective memory.
5. Evoking interest in historical knowledge by raising topics accessible to children and related to their needs at that age.

Recommended scope of the educational content

At this stage, we want to build a general framework of historical knowledge about World War II, which is why we communicate only basic facts about this period, including information about the history of the Jewish community. What we consider to be basic information in this regard:

- knowledge about the Jewish community before the war (diversity, daily life)
- the outbreak of the World War II and the gradual process of excluding various groups before and throughout the war

- the first years of the war and life during the occupation

Emotional safety

- Ensure the child's/children's emotional safety. It is essential that they learn the facts of the war in a way that takes into account their cognitive and emotional capacity.
- When you discuss historical facts with your students, do not ignore their emotions. This history may stir up difficult emotions, which should be identified and discussed. Make sure this happens after watching a film/reading a text.
- If you work with a group, take the group dynamic into consideration. For children of this age, showing emotion can be embarrassing. For example, children might be reluctant to answer questions about the story they have just heard. If that happens, adjust your methods to the situation—e.g., you can ask students to first discuss the story in groups of three, and only then ask the group as a whole what they talked about in their smaller groups.
- Although at this stage you do not communicate detailed information about the Holocaust, do not leave the children with oblique statements—e.g., say plainly that the protagonist of a given story died later in the war.
- If a child starts asking questions about the more extreme aspects of the war, answer them on a general level. Do not ignore these questions. For instance, if a child asks what happened to the family of a character in a story, answer that it's likely most of the family died during the war. But do not describe in detail how mass executions were carried out or what death in gas chambers looked like.
- Leave time for closure: emphasize that the issues you discuss concern the past and that remembering the past is important.
- Broach the material in doses. Do not dwell too long—in a single day, or within a single week—on the subject of war.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

When this subject is discussed, an emotional reaction to the content, with an entire repertory of possible reactions, somewhat depends on the age of recipients. The older they are, the more controlled you can expect their emotional reactions to be, but strong responses cannot be ruled out in any age group. However, strategies to support students who experience these emotions may vary. While with younger children it is important to help them identify emotions and provide other non-verbal and indirect ways to release them (such as playing, art, etc.), children aged 10–12 should practice reflecting on their own and others' emotional states. This stage of development is also characterized by the fact that children are ready to consider how they can help themselves in these difficult situations (e.g., when they experience stress). On the other hand, they have a similar capacity to help others in difficult emotional situations, such as when their classmates experience anger, shame, or sadness. So although the teacher should still oversee the dynamics of particular children's emotions, as well as the overall situation, they can start to share the task of "emotional management," giving young people the opportunity to seek appropriate ways to support themselves individually and within the group.

General teaching methodology guidelines

- Look for narratives children will find interesting, e.g., stories featuring their peers. Try to engage children in the stories they encounter, but be careful they do not identify too strongly with the characters.
- Do not look for analogies between historical events and the present—you can do this when the child is older. At this point they are still at the stage of organizing their knowledge, and adding yet another level of reflection can disrupt this process.
- Familiarize the child with general facts concerning World War II (e.g., the fact that people died in concentration camps), and not with realistic descriptions of

suffering (e.g., descriptions of the agony prisoners of those camps experienced dying of hunger).

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

At this stage of development, different approaches of particular students to the new content or teaching methods can present a challenge for the teacher. Some can even negate and reject the teacher's ideas. Even if a lesson follows an excellent methodology, includes carefully curated content, attractive materials and aids, it can be received badly, criticized, or boycotted. We can refer to at least two developmental causes for such a reaction. Above all, we should remember that this stage consists of individuals within a group fluctuating between a sense of inferiority, an optimal level, and an idealized sense of their own competence. Some children in the group will be fearful of the new, others will be doing everything to prove the new is boring, as they already know everything. It would be unrealistic to expect that the entire class undergoes this developmental crisis in the same way, and everyone is at the point of optimal competence where they feel joy to be able to learn new things. The second developmental cause is the departure from vertical relationships (with a parent or a teacher) toward horizontal relationships (increasingly important exchange, cooperation, practicing, and testing within a group of peers in which everyone is in a similar position). We should, therefore, consider how to conduct lessons to include this peer potential. In a group of children, foundations of a social identity are forming; children react better to the content shared among themselves than propositions presented by adults. Furthermore, cognitive development and the resulting ability to adopt the message to the recipient enables more effective group work. The function of a vertical relationship (teacher-student) is to provide children with a sense of security, enable them to acquire knowledge, and learn. Transferring the activity to the horizontal relationship will give children more freedom in testing, exchanging roles and knowledge, and practicing their skills.

Selecting materials, language, and content

- Do not show brutal images or scenes from films.
- Remember that many ideas connected to the subject of war are incomprehensible to a child. If you decide to use them, always explain them using language accessible to your students.
- Bring order into the chaos of information about the war that children have absorbed from various sources.
- Focus only on the most basic facts and historical processes. Explain what they result from. Do not overwhelm children with a lot of encyclopedic knowledge.

Chapter 4: Education in the 13–15 age group

In this age group, it's important to deepen students' historical knowledge of World War II. Students 13–15 are developing a maturity that makes it possible for them to engage with the realities of the war. We recommend discussing the historical events of the war through the lens of the experiences of the Jewish community and individual Jewish victims and survivors. However, we still refrain from providing this age group with detailed descriptions of mass murder or graphic scenes of cruelty.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

Students in this age group are significantly more capable of engaging with abstract ideas (like truth, justice, and love, etc.) and analyzing problems from several points of view. They often get into heated discussions with adults on all sorts of topics. Teenagers hope to increase their understanding and look for rational explanations for principles they previously accepted. They tend toward irony and ambivalence: they often have both a positive and negative view of something at the same time. As they build who they are, they focus on figuring out their own values, worldview, and opinions, often in contrast to those of their parents and other important adults in their lives.

Educational goals

1. Acquire reliable, more detailed historical knowledge about World War II and the events leading up to the Holocaust
2. Learn about and attempt to understand the various viewpoints of different people and social groups during the war.
3. Reflect on the memory (as well as local memory) of the Jewish community, preserving the memory of Polish Jews who died during the Holocaust.
4. Understand Polish identity as comprised of different cultures and traditions.

Recommended scope of the educational content

At this stage, we look for answers, with the students, to the questions What, Where, When, and Why; in the case of the Holocaust, the answers to these questions require us to delve deeper into the topic with greater attention to specific details than we have up until this point. We can also look at themes connected to interpersonal relationships (friendship, sacrifice, hate, neighborliness, jealousy, etc.) and investigate the motivations of various groups (victims, perpetrators, collaborators, passive bystanders, saviors, etc.). It's important to demonstrate how Nazi propaganda and antisemitism were integral to the preparation and implementation of the Holocaust. With regard to the more graphic material, we still refrain from teaching students about the mechanisms of mass murder (i.e., showing images, reading descriptions, etc.).

Emotional safety

- Be aware of the fact that for students in this age group, the topic of the war and wartime atrocities can evoke a strong emotional response, even if the students don't show it outright.
- Practices with regard to emotional safety discussed earlier (for younger age groups) are still recommended. In short: create a safe atmosphere for talking about the war, allow students time to process their difficult emotions, suggest an activity to express these emotions.
- Students aged 13–15 are often embarrassed to show their emotions, so caring for their emotional safety can be particularly challenging. If you know the group you're working with, create the proper conditions for them to safely express their emotions. For example, instead of discussing a difficult topic as an entire class, propose conversations in pairs or writing reflections on post-it notes, which can be handed in and read anonymously.

- Create situations in which students can share their opinions and disagree with one another in a safe environment, i.e., one in which they will not be ridiculed, judged, or rejected by the group.
- When discussing the Holocaust, always set aside time for venting emotions. David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory may be helpful here. It proposes a four-stage cycle:
 - Stage I: An experience, which may be an exercise, watching a film clip, or discussing a photograph together, etc.
 - Stage II: Time for individual reflection (observations, impressions, and emotional responses to the experience/material)—this stage is sometimes overlooked by the paradigm school, but it’s an important part of the educational process, because students in this age group tend to have very strong emotional reactions, which can distort their cognition and how they process information and form memories. Therefore, we should create a space for reflection on the impressions and emotions evoked in Stage I.
 - Stage III: Contextualizing the results of the previous two stages—sharing additional knowledge about the topic at hand.
 - Stage IV: Applying the knowledge: students ask themselves how what they’ve learned relates to the present day.
- Build a relationship with your students in which you engage them in the topic by showing them your support and encouraging their curiosity (e.g., “There’s no wrong questions”). Avoid judging or embarrassing them, which can be especially painful at this age and may discourage them from engaging in the lesson.
- Avoid reconstructing, staging, or recreating wartime situations (such as in a roleplaying exercise), which might cause students to overly identify with the characters they portray.



General teaching methodology guidelines

- When talking about the war, try to refer to the local context—for example, refer to the history of the community from the city or town in which you work. Traces of memory are present in every Polish locality and local memory gives history concerns us, it becomes more personal. (To borrow a phrase often used in German education: “Dig where you are.”)
- Often the key to getting students engaged is the teacher’s own enthusiasm for the subject. Your genuine interest in the material may jumpstart your students’ curiosity.
- A particular challenge in teaching this age group about the war and the Holocaust is in knowing how to respond to antisemitic comments. These may arise from a desire to provoke, to rebel, or from the fact that teenagers often have an incomplete knowledge of the war, tinged by stereotype, sometimes ideologically slanted, thanks to the media, their families, or stories in the community. The real difficulty then becomes passing on accurate knowledge without causing a student to feel like they’re betraying their family/community if they have such beliefs. This does not preclude correcting their knowledge, filling in the gaps, sharing different perspectives, and critiquing commonly held views and opinions, all while respecting the person on the other side. It can also be vital to “give back” the discussion to the group, allowing for an exchange of opinions between peers.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

This is an age at which students are dealing with sudden and drastic changes in terms of biological, mental, and social functioning. These changes, which are in fact evidence of normal adolescent development, often manifest in the form of social withdrawal, blips of competence, poor life decisions, and possible rebellion. Teenagers are beginning to define themselves (“Who am I?”) and their futures (“Who do I want to be?”), which necessitates a thorough cataloging of their previous life experiences. This means a lot of soul-searching

and self-work, while navigating their own unstable psyches. They achieve this through experimenting, rebelling, and expressing themselves in clear, sometimes uncompromising ways. A focus on “I,” an interest in oneself, and their own mind and body, can prevail over all other subjects. Negativity arises—that is, rejecting what their parents or other adults propose. This is the most common manifestation of the start of a young person’s serious and difficult engagement with themselves and the concept of their own life. There’s a great deal of emotional lability—a tendency to experience frequent changes in emotional states. They may experience everything from sudden changes of emotion, the quick loss of emotional stability, to negative emotions, difficulty controlling their emotions, and teenage depression. Hormones cause their emotions to rise quickly and with unique intensity.

Selecting materials, language, and content

- For students younger than 16, we don’t recommend teaching about the details and specific mechanisms of genocide. And, once again, this does not refer only to the details of mass murder, but also of the other atrocities that would be too much for a teenager to bear.
- For students younger than 16, we advise against visiting the memorial sites of concentration camps and death camps.
- It’s typical for a teenager to be completely uninterested in the lesson or the subject, because at the center of their universe are their own concerns with their identity, body, and social acceptance. When talking about the war, look for themes that might better engage or feel relevant to teenagers, such as the body, daily life, a conflict of values, loyalty and betrayal, self-preservation vs. helping others. Another dynamic at play may be the teenager dismissing the topic because it’s too emotionally difficult or because it causes an internal conflict in their worldview. This may manifest as an apparent lack of interest.
- Include different perspectives when you teach about the history of the Holocaust: e.g., World War II from the perspective of a child, a woman, or any

individual person. Don't limit yourself to political or military history. Seek out forgotten or obscure stories. For example, if you're teaching about the history of Żegota, the Council to Aid Jews, and their efforts to rescue children led by Irena Sendler, you might discuss not only the heroism of the rescuers and how the hidden children survived, but also the emotional dilemma of parents who had to give up their children. You could talk as well about the social context of the Righteous—how they operated in solitude.

- As you introduce students to more difficult topics, take care to build a sense of respect and understanding for the victims of the war. Choose the pictures and films you'd like to show students with great consideration. Don't try to shock them. Don't show images with graphic scenes of death, violence, or degradation. Don't try to make the historical content more "exciting" in your efforts to engage students in the topic.
- Use precise, accurate, and relevant language when talking about the Holocaust. If you employ Nazi terminology, do so consciously and acknowledge that it's the language of the perpetrators (e.g., Aryan side, transports, "the final solution to the Jewish question," etc.).

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

Teenage rebellion grows out of two basic processes that help young people develop constructive ways to form their new identities. On the one hand, it's a form of exploration (meaning experimentation, testing one's possibilities, etc.), and on the other, it's a way of engaging (emotionally, intellectually) in the activities and ideas that are important to a teenager. It's worth assuming that a certain element of contrariness fulfills an essential step of development. The logic of identity formation requires that a young person first "disconnect" from the adults around them and the system of norms, values, and institutions in which they grew up, in order to have the opportunity to critique them, so that later, in a period of further growth, they'll become more similar to these adults.

Making space for disagreement, contrariness, and rebellion can be, regardless of the reason for the resistance, particularly crucial for people at this stage of development. It's important to have a relationship with adults that, while allowing for a significant degree of autonomy, makes it possible for the young person to share difficult experiences and doubts, express a point of view that deviates from that of the adults, feel safe in the knowledge that one can make mistakes, and know they're supported.

POLIN
Museum of
the History
of Polish Jews

6 Anielewicza St.
PL-00157 Warsaw
Poland

T +48 22 471 03 00
@ polin@polin.pl

Iceland
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Jewish
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Chapter 5: Education in the 16–18 age group

In this age group we recommend teaching about the Holocaust in its full chronological and factual scope, including the details and mechanisms of mass murder. We also suggest looking for connections between the past and the present.

Educational goals

1. Attain the fullest possible knowledge about Holocaust.
2. See the history of the Holocaust through the lens of other disciplines, such as psychology and the social sciences.
3. Understand how the topic of the Holocaust is treated today, especially in terms of memory and memorialization.
4. Learn to take part in public debates on difficult aspects of the past, which is an essential part of forming one's (critical) civic identity.
5. Develop an openness toward minority groups, including learning to counteract antisemitism.

Recommended scope of the educational content

Evidence suggests that students at this later stage of education typically need to repeat and review the knowledge they should have learned at a lower level. We recommend that you don't assume their knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust is all that extensive and instead return to the basic facts of the material, adding additional information and deepening their knowledge as you go along. We suggest following the concentric method of teaching, adding new details as you circle through familiar material, thereby building up their knowledge.

In this age group, if your students possess the proper emotional maturity, you may teach about the details and mechanisms of mass murder during the Holocaust, such as how the concentration camps and death camps functioned. You can decide as a class if you want to

visit one of these sites of memory. Such a visit should be well prepared for and properly conducted and debriefed. If someone in the class doesn't feel ready to visit a site of memory, they should absolutely not be forced or coaxed into doing so.

We suggest that you consider the changes in your students' mindsets as you teach. This means not only conveying the facts of the topic, but also an understanding of historical processes and their consequences for the individual. You might teach about how social mechanisms that exist in any society have more extreme consequences during times of war—for example, how social exclusion and discrimination affected people during World War II and the Holocaust. You might also address the attitudes and mindsets adopted by individuals during the war and discuss them together from an ethical perspective.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

Teenagers have a hard time handling the randomness and complexity of social reality, which often defies the rules of formal logic. With their new mentalities, they're endlessly discovering inconsistencies and inaccuracies in their parents' and teachers' ways of thinking. A young person might see the world as a battle between opposites, people for and against, us vs. them. This value system can be rigid and radical, with a clear overarching ideology that a teenager will fiercely defend.

It's an important moment when a young person starts to seek out different ideologies, role models, and groups by which they might define themselves. This stage, in which a teenager practices their loyalty to certain ideological decisions, can be uncomfortable and sometimes even annoying to the adults around them, especially if it manifests in what the adults perceive as a strange way of dressing, a new diet, or a change in vocabulary and interests. In some cases, it means identifying with a group that has a negative influence on them, threatening their own identity development (with hierarchical, radical, exclusionary thinking, an us vs. them mentality, strong dogmatic ties). One challenge for teachers will be that students of this age may tend to close themselves off in their own worlds (e.g., in a

fringe group with extreme opinions), lacking curiosity and unwilling to hear counter-arguments or other opinions.

Emotional safety

- Holocaust education in this oldest age group should be an even more considered and thoughtful process than in the previous age groups, because here is where we engage with the most difficult aspects of mass murder and genocide. Each time you talk about it (each individual lesson or conversation), you need to include thorough preparation and debriefing. This applies both to the transfer of essential knowledge (so that the students understand and assimilate the factual information you're presenting) and to the emotional care of the group.
- The praxis shows that the more students know about the Holocaust, the stronger their emotional response will be to material related to the war. Most likely this is tied to greater empathy and a more active imagination (the ability to understand, for example, things that are not shown in the material but merely implied—like if a movie shows the gas chamber doors closing without depicting what happens inside). It's important to keep this in mind and not assume that older students will experience less pain when talking about and studying wartime atrocities.
- Gradually introduce material connected to the Holocaust, starting with the less emotionally overwhelming material. Observe how your students react, and take note of which students are especially sensitive and may need greater support.
- If you see that the material you introduce (e.g., a film, an image) is very distressing for even just one student, take it away/turn it off. Start a conversation toward a less emotionally difficult subject, so the overwhelmed student(s) can take a breath (e.g., you could talk about the subject of the film/image in less direct terms, or share the stories of people who survived, or give examples of civil resistance or aid). Of course, this isn't about distorting history, but rather choosing in this moment not to intensify already difficult emotions, which could

be traumatizing. In working with potentially traumatizing material, it's essential to clearly "enter" and "exit" the subject so that students don't remain in it after the lesson, so that they can reconnect with the "here and now" (with their reality, in which they're not in a war). That's why it's equally important that, if a certain group or participant is going through a difficult experience (e.g., a student is in mourning), you hold off on discussing this kind of material. Sometimes you can help bring the student in question back to the "here and now" by changing the space you're in, letting the student leave the class with a friend for a little while, or taking a short break together. Check in on the student after class, propose a one-on-one conversation—you can also ask for the support of the school psychologist or counselor. Don't underestimate what the student is experiencing.

- As a teacher, learn how to regulate the emotions of the students in your class, and take note of when you should pause a lesson or even give up on it entirely. You might discover that your students need more time to integrate difficult material.
- If one or two students in the class have a very strong emotional reaction (if they start crying, for example), then it's a good idea, after de-escalating the situation, to have a group discussion about what emotions the material brings up—but talk about how it affects the group as a whole. Singling out one person in front of the class and asking about their feelings can be extremely embarrassing for them; it's better to have that conversation in private.
- Only part of any given lesson should be spent watching film clips or looking at photographs—more time should be spent discussing these materials. When introducing, say, a film clip, it's a good idea to mention what emotions it might bring up for the class. This kind of content warning gives young people a feeling of control over what's happening to them and helps decrease their anxiety or apprehension: they're prepared for what they might feel and understand what's

causing it—they can frame the experience with clarity. Equally important is the conversation after the clip, about what the class has just seen.

- Key to ensuring the emotional safety of the class while engaging with these difficult topics is the relationship between the teacher and students. Only by having a strong relationship with and thorough understanding of the people in your class, can you responsibly decide what subjects and material you can safely introduce and where exactly you need to stop.
- It can be difficult when educators are working with groups they don't know—such as at a museum, sites of memory, or other educational institutions. In such cases, it's a good idea to speak with the group's teacher before the session to learn about the group, and maybe consult with the teacher about the materials and exercise you're planning on introducing to the group. It's a special skill for an educator to be able to react in real time to the needs and signals of participants they do not know.
- It's very important that you take care not to rush through the subject of the Holocaust, that you make time for discussion. Students need space to sit with the material in a safe, supportive environment, and to return to the subject in individual conversations, if they feel the need to do so. The emotional availability and awareness of the educator are essential here.
- For visits to sites of memory, make sure students have a moment to consciously enter and exit the site. In a sense, this acts as a kind of ritual that helps students consciously experience the visit, as well as giving them space to step back into contemporary reality.

Characteristics of the age group – side notes

Though you might at times have the impression that students in this age group are already full-fledged adults, it's important that you focus not only on the educational content of the lesson but also on continuing to support your students' developmental needs and addressing any attitudes they have that might impair their ability to learn. Remember that in

their parents' generation, i.e., "back in my day," adolescence was much shorter. Teenagers, even in late adolescence, still need time to reach adulthood, and a supportive adult can open their eyes to the diversity of the world.

General teaching methodology guidelines

- Introduce ethical dilemmas, teach your students to recognize them in the stories of specific people. Present issues that build controversy and encourage your students to think through different positions. Don't, however, go for an unequivocal assessment of the people you present to the class. (You might compare the situations and mindsets of, for example, Adam Czerniaków and Chaim Rumkowski.) Step out of a black-and-white way of thinking.
- Engage your students in these discussions. Don't ask questions like "What would you have done in this person's shoes?"—we consider this framework unethical. (No one knows how they'd behave in as extreme a situation as war—such speculation disrespects the people who lived and suffered at the time.) Instead, we suggest that you engage students by asking questions about the historical figures' motives—e.g., "Why did the Jewish police agree to help carry out deportations to concentration camps?" or "What reasons did they have for doing so?" Effective Holocaust and World War II education requires that students attempt to understand ambivalent, ambiguous situations.
- Treat the lesson as a space in which asking questions is more important than finding answers: an unequivocal answer kills the conversation. Create an environment in which students feel comfortable asking whatever questions arise for them.
- Teach your students well-researched and accurate information, demonstrating how this makes it possible to examine different perspectives and think critically about the material. An attitude that makes room for doubt and rejects easy,

unambiguous answers will prepare students to participate in contemporary debates about history and memory.

- Be mindful of the language you use when speaking about the Holocaust—ask yourself what kind of language would be most appropriate and accurate. (For example, referring to a site visit as “a trip to Auschwitz” isn’t appropriate, because “trip” has a connotation of fun and relaxation, a vacation; a better term would be “an educational visit to a site of memory.”)
- Don’t assume that merely by teaching about the Holocaust, you can shape your students’ opinions or combat antisemitism. No research has shown that Holocaust education alone (i.e., education about the facts of the Holocaust) is an effective tool in combating antisemitism. Rather, it may be one important element in a broader educational process, which includes deeper engagement and experiential learning (e.g., anti-discrimination workshops).
- When talking about death and mass murder, wartime atrocities, it’s important not only what you say but how you say it: your tone of voice, if you let yourself to be authentic and show your emotions, when you pause, when you allow for silence.
- Students at this age may already have a lot of knowledge on the subject, though it’s often biased, or colored by their interests, frames of reference, or social groups (e.g., the cursed soldiers, conspiracy theories, etc., but also human rights issues, or social justice). Furthermore, they’ve developed enough linguistic skill to persuasively and confidently argue viewpoints that may not be in line with the educator’s thinking. A teenager who tries to “out-talk” or “argue down” the teacher will simply be enacting their developmental stage. It’s important not to take this kind of behavior personally, but rather to see it as part of the spectrum of development.

Selecting materials, language, and content

- Students of 16 or older can learn about the Holocaust in all its aspects, including about the details and mechanisms of mass murder.
- Try to show the mechanisms behind the psychosocial attitudes of different groups of people who participated in the genocide (such as the submission to authority, the mindless execution of orders, mass conformity). Conversations about the conditions affecting people’s behavior during the Holocaust may lead to a better understanding of the event.
- Introduce the class to a wide range of issues, guided by the meaning we give them and not only the chronological order of the historical facts.
- Engage the class in a critical analysis of how the Holocaust functions in mass culture (e.g., in popular films, books, TV shows, etc.).
- Though the Holocaust is an event primarily concerning the fate of Europe’s Jews, situate it in the broader context of genocide. Discuss the victims of other genocides and commemorate them.
- Be prepared for a conversation on the difficult aspects of wartime history, such as the attitude of Poles toward Jews during the Holocaust. Avoid generalizations—refer to specific examples of different attitudes and behaviors. Quote well-researched, reliable sources. Make sure everyone has a chance to express their opinion in an atmosphere of mutual respect. At the same time, avoid politicizing the Holocaust—don’t use it as a tool in a political argument. Allowing conversations on this level can increase the group’s engagement in the topic. It’s also good practice in logical thinking, formulating judgments, and “dressing” your thoughts in clear language so that they may be understood by others.

Based on the experiences of the POLIN Museum's Education Department
collected and edited by Dr. Sonia Ruszkowska

The psychology and development content was prepared by Dominika Cieřlikowska

Robert Szuchta and Dorota Siarkowska consulted on the project

POLIN
Museum of
the History
of Polish Jews

6 Anielewicz St.
PL-00157 Warsaw
Poland

T +48 22 471 03 00
@ polin@polin.pl

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