

HOW TO TALK TO CAMPERS ABOUT EVENTS IN ISRAEL¹

You play a crucial role in shaping the experiences and perspectives of the campers in your care. When you discuss events in Israel with campers, it's important to approach the topic with sensitivity and understanding. This will help campers navigate complex topics and develop critical thinking skills while fostering compassion and a sense of responsibility towards global issues.

When preparing to speak with campers about difficult issues it's important to remember that their awareness and understanding of and responses to events depend on their age and stage of development.

- Preschoolers will understand Israel as a country, but not much about conflict and war.
- Those in Kindergarten through Grade 2 will be aware that Israel is involved in a conflict that is ongoing and will understand that bad things happen in war.
- Third and fourth graders will be aware of some details about October 7 and the war, perhaps including the targeting of Jewish children. This age is an important pivot moment: if someone the child knows doesn't make the space to talk about these difficult issues, someone else will.
- Fourth and fifth graders will be aware of many issues and have a layered anxiety for people in Israel and civilians in Gaza.
- Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders begin to be aware of politics. They will be aware that there are divisions within the North American Jewish community, that there is hostile discourse in social media and online, and that the politics and policies about the conflict are controversial.
- High school students will be aware of all of this and understand it on more sophisticated level.

Here are some tips to help you navigate these conversations effectively:

General Tips

- **Stay Informed:** Educate yourself about events in Israel from reputable news sources. Understanding the context and facts will enable you to provide accurate information.
- **Model Calmness:** Campers look to you for guidance on how to react to challenging topics. Remain calm and composed during discussions, demonstrate empathy and understanding.
- **Create a Safe Space:** Foster an environment of open communication where campers feel comfortable asking questions and expressing their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment.

¹ Adapted from the presentation "Ages and Stages," by Sivan Zakai, PhD, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion on Monday, April 15, 2024, and "[Explaining the News to Our Kids](#)", Common Sense Media, October 10, 2023,

- **Establish Ground Rules:** Set explicit norms for how we talk in the camp community, stressing that this is an inclusive space and that potentially contentious talk of politics must be respectful.
- **Stress Centrality:** Think about Israel like we think about Torah; that it is woven into everyday moments, all the time, every day.
- **Don't Ignore Realities:** It's important to be explicit about the realities of Israel, otherwise we lose trust; children don't want to hear you say, "don't worry, it will all be fine."
- **Make Time for Joy:** The conflict should not be our sole focus. Part of a meaningful Jewish life is knowing there is joy and sorrow, that we must cope with both, and that we have rituals for all these moments.

Tips for Campers Under 7

- **Limit Exposure:** Shield young campers from graphic images and intense news coverage which may be distressing for them.
- **Simplify Explanations:** Explain events using language appropriate for their age level. Focus on basic concepts such as safety, peace, and understanding.
- **Reassure Safety:** Emphasize that camp is a safe and welcoming environment for all campers, regardless of their background or beliefs.

Tips for Campers Ages 8–12

- **Provide Context:** Offer historical and cultural context to help older campers understand the complexities of the situation. Discuss the perspectives of different groups involved in the conflict.
- **Encourage Critical Thinking:** Engage campers in discussions that encourage them to question media narratives and consider multiple viewpoints.
- **Respect Their Views:** Campers in this age group may have questions and concerns about events. Listen to their perspectives and provide reassurance and guidance as needed.

Tips for Campers Ages 12+

- **Discuss Humanitarian Aspects:** Talk to campers about the humanitarian impact of events, including the experiences of civilians, children, and families affected by conflict.
- **Explore Solutions:** Encourage campers to think about peaceful solutions and ways to promote understanding and empathy towards all parties involved in the events.
- **Take Action:** Organize camp activities or initiatives that promote empathy, understanding, and support for humanitarian efforts or organizations working towards peace and reconciliation in Israel and the surrounding region.