

War and the flood of news – MLL lesson plan

The lesson plan is designed for grades 4–9 to address the feelings evoked by the war and its news coverage.

Background

Global conflicts, catastrophes and wars surge through the headlines, TV news and social media. It may be hard for children and young people to avoid seeing and hearing age-inappropriate content which may cause fear and anxiety. Children pick up on adults' emotions, and these emotions can be hard to bear. It is particularly important for children and young people to be able to talk about the feelings evoked by the news coverage and social media. Upsetting war imagery and unconfirmed information is spreading across social media. Children and young people may not have the skills to assess the reliability of the news and social media. In the flood of news, it is important for the adults around the children and young people to build a sense of safety and stability and to give them space and opportunities to talk about how they feel. It is the adults' duty to discuss the thoughts triggered by the news and media with children and young people and to answer their questions. It is up to the adults to build an ordinary everyday life for children and young people and to find ways to support their wellbeing. Adults are also responsible for making sure that every child and young person can go to school safely, without experiencing discrimination or bullying – including the prevention of possible cyberbullying.

Objectives

The objectives of the lesson plan are 1) to create a safe space, 2) to address the emotions evoked by the news coverage and social media, 3) to learn about reliable sources, and 4) to reduce prejudice and minimize discrimination.

Implementation

The aim of the lesson plan is to support the wellbeing of children and young people and their media criticism in the middle of the war and conflict news. The assignments can cause a lot of discussion. You can adapt the material to suit your group and continue working on it in another lesson. The plan can be used in grades 4–6 of lower comprehensive school and grades 7–9 of upper comprehensive school. The lesson plan is designed for schools and others working in education, teaching and the youth sector. The lesson plan can also be applied in hobby activities.

Safe discussion 15 min

Background: Before addressing the actual topic, create a safe space in the classroom. War news can trigger strong reactions in children and young people who have personal experience of the topic or are close to someone with such experiences. Some of the children and young people may have family members, friends or relatives in Ukraine or Russia. The news can cause discrimination and bullying or even hate speech, which should be addressed immediately if it occurs. The principles of safer space make it easier to deal with difficult topics. It is essential not to trivialize anyone's emotions or discriminate against anyone because of their assumed background.

Tip: Learn more about the principles of safer space using the accessible image and text on the YouthNet page on hate speech and counter-speech: [Vihapuhetta ja vastapuhetta - Nuortennetti](#)

Instructions: Become familiar with the concept of safer space. Explain to the pupils that you will come up with your own principles for safe discussion and listening in your classroom. Read or display the principles of safer space one by one and go through the questions together. How could your group follow the principles of safer space? Should something be added or modified to suit you better? Is there a perspective that should be added? Display your principles somewhere clearly visible on the wall or make an art exhibition. Agree to follow the principles together.

Openness – allow people to define their gender or culture themselves
Enable participation – make sure that everyone can participate in the way that suits them and is heard in the group
Address harassment – if you notice any harassment, make it clear that it will not be tolerated. Sort out the situation immediately
Respect – give others enough space and respect their feelings
Be willing to learn – everyone messes up sometimes, but you learn from your mistakes and apologize

Fact or fiction? 10 min

Background: There is a lot of mis- and disinformation spreading around during times of war and conflicts when information travels fast and people do not have the time or the will to check all sources. War propaganda, on the other hand, is material that tries to defame the opponent. It is important to learn to identify which sources are reliable.

Tip: More information in YouthNet: [Treenaa lähdekritiikkiä - Nuortennetti](#)

Instructions: Discuss ways to spot misinformation on social media with the pupils. Can the pupils spot it in the news they read or the social media sites they use? Can they come up with examples?

1. Fact or opinion? Where did you see the news? A lot of information is shared on social media, but not all of it is based on facts, but it can also be someone's opinion of something.

2. Is the source of the news or information reliable? Has the writer written the text using their own name? Are they a real person? Can the source of the news or information be found?

3. What is the angle and purpose of the news? Does the news try to influence the way you think? Remember that proper news relies on research and statements made by reliable authorities and experts. A good news story presents multiple angles in a neutral way and reflects on the topic from several perspectives.

4. Learn to identify harmful and distorted news and news based on biased values. Has the person who created or shared the news wanted to provide only a single perspective, leaving out something else that is relevant? Does the news involve the use of power?

5. Study the images, videos and infographics. Learn to spot photo manipulations. Images can be edited, cropped a certain way or removed from the original context so that their original meaning is changed.

6. Identify hate speech that discriminates against others. The purpose of these types of news is to turn people's opinion against a particular topic, person or group.

7. Do not pass on hearsay or questionable information. Learn to spot fake news sites that are used to spread questionable information.

8. If necessary, limit the time you spend on social media, if you feel like the news and the comments are making you feel bad, anxious or more fearful. Follow sources that produce factual content and make you feel good.

Emotions evoked by the news and social media 15 min

Background: Social media and the news are filled with emotive material during times of conflict. War news coverage is aimed at adults, but children and young people cannot avoid hearing and seeing the news that also spread through social media. The content on social media platforms often mostly consists of civilian experiences and thoughts as people share images and videos directly from the conflict zone. Be prepared to answer pupils' questions, because there is a lot of violent, brutal, distressing and unconfirmed information spreading through social media. Always direct pupils to reliable sources that are appropriate to their level of development. Examples of such sources include HS Lasten uutiset and Yle Mix. Remind the pupils that it is important to talk about their thoughts and feelings at this time. It is also a good idea to take a break from social media and the news from time to time, put their phone away or even stop using an app if they are feeling overwhelmed and have trouble falling asleep.

Tip: [see tehtäväkortti 431 Ajatuksia netistä](#)

Instructions: Print enough emotion cards (attached) for the pupils and ask them to choose 3 pictures that portray the emotions they are feeling right now because of the war news and social media. Every emotion is equally valuable. Ask the pupils to discuss the media material that they have seen and heard in pairs or in small groups. Briefly go through the topics as a group with an emphasis on the last two questions.

Have you heard or seen something that has left a strong impression on your mind?

Have you seen and heard something that causes negative emotions?

Have you seen and heard something that causes positive and optimistic emotions?

Can you take a break from social media if it causes negative emotions? How would that feel?

Do you have ways to experience more positive emotions on social media? How about outside social media?

What makes you happy or puts you in a good mood?

Hurtful behaviour in school and online 20 min

Background: Current news and social media can manifest as bullying in and outside school and online. Bullying and discrimination is always wrong. Bullying that occurs online, or cyberbullying, can be addressed e.g. by reporting the inappropriate behaviour to the administration of the social media site. Bullying rarely occurs either only in school or online. School bullying can continue online or vice versa. It is important to tell adults about these incidents as well so that the hurtful behaviour can be stopped together. The war and the related news can upset particularly children and young people who have experienced war or who have friends or relatives in Ukraine. The war can similarly cause distress in children and young people of Russian descent, and they may even feel shame and guilt because of it. It is important to make it clear to them that they have nothing to do with the war. Nobody has the right to bully them or discriminate against them because of the war or for any other reason. It is the government that is always responsible for starting a war, not the individuals, the people of a nation. Both the Ukrainians and the Russians are suffering because of the war. Children and young people of Russian descent living in Finland should be treated just as kindly as everyone else. You should not bully or discriminate against anyone because of their background. Children and their parents are not responsible for the war. The assignment helps to discuss bullying in school and online and how everyone can help prevent it.

See tehtäväkortti 424 [Loukkaava kohtelu koulussa ja netissä](#)

Instructions: Place a ball in the middle of the room and say that it represents the centre of a ring. Ask the pupils to form a ring around the ball. Ask the participants to step further in and out of the ring depending on how they feel about the statements and questions: the more they agree, the closer they go to the centre, and the more they disagree, the further they go from the centre. The exercise can also be done as a line segment with the pupils moving along a segment where one end stands for agree and the other for disagree. Each pupil picks the point that best represents their opinion of the matter. Remind the participants that there are no right or wrong answers to the statements. This is about their personal experiences, views and opinions. After each statement, you can ask the participants to share their thoughts about where they are standing on the segment and about the statement. Tell them that they may also change their position during the discussion if their thoughts change. The exercise deals with the use of social media. Tell the participants that if they do not use social media at all, they can answer the statements based on their impression of things.

Statements for the exercise “Hurtful behaviour in school and online”:

1. It is easy to be yourself in school.
2. It is easy to be yourself on social media and games.
3. Things in the news and on social media are visible in daily life at school.
4. There is a link between bullying in school and the current news.
5. Bullying or hurtful behaviour online is common among young people.
6. I have witnessed cyberbullying or hurtful behaviour online regarding the pupils in our school.
7. I have noticed hurtful comments directed at a pupil in school or online because of their mother tongue or background.
8. I have noticed that others have started to discriminate against a pupil because of the current situation in the world.
9. I have noticed that someone doesn't want to speak their language for fear of bullying or discrimination.
10. I have noticed tension or conflicts between pupils from different backgrounds that did not exist before.
11. It's easier to bully others online than face to face.
12. I don't feel well if I see bullying around me.
13. There's at least one adult in our school who can help if a pupil in our school is bullied.
14. I always tell someone about any bullying I see.
15. I could help in some way if I noticed someone being treated badly online, on social media or in a game.
16. I can defend the bullied and show them compassion.



Hate speech and counter-speech 10 min

Background: The news and social media can bring out stereotypes, prejudices and even hate speech. It is extremely important to underline that private individuals are not responsible for the war and that a person's background must never lead to bullying or discrimination. Bullying in and outside school and online is simply wrong and places an unreasonable burden on the bullied. The situation can feel overwhelming even without any bullying. Prejudices and racism do not occur only between children and young people in schools. They occur in cyberbullying on social media and can also be present in comments made by adults. Counter-speech is a way of countering racism and hate speech. Counter-speech is humane, empathetic expression. It is not aimed directly at the person using hate speech, but tries to bring about a change in the way other people think. Counter-speech can be about taking simple everyday actions: standing by the bullied and the person targeted by hate speech and making sure they receive help and support.

Tip: See the definition of hate speech and the principles of counter-speech in [Hate speech and counter-speech - The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare \(mll.fi\)](https://mll.fi/en/hate-speech-and-counter-speech)

Instructions: Tell the pupils what racism and hate speech are: Hate speech is any expression that incites and spreads discrimination and intolerance. Hate speech spreads on social media in the form of messages, meme pictures and fake media content. It is often aimed at the culture and background of a person. Watch the video "Empatia netissä" <https://youtu.be/TEUzb5dYrpk> (3 min)

Discuss the video:

How did you feel about the video?

In your opinion, what are empathy skills?

How could you personally prevent bullying and discrimination?

How could you create more empathy in school, at home or online? Why do you think empathy skills are needed right now?

