

# Enabling every young person to engage with and enjoy *Difference*



The below guidance is intended to help you create an accessible and welcoming environment which will enable the students in your group to engage with - and enjoy - *Difference*.

## Every person is different

It is particularly important to bear in mind that every person in your group will have had different experiences and will have different needs when engaging with *Difference*. For some young people it will be helpful to encourage them to step out of their comfort zones and to provide them with opportunities for reflection. For others, it will be important to underline the importance of their wellbeing and ensure that they do not feel under pressure to engage (with individuals, groups or issues) when that is not what they need to do at this point.

## Emotional regulation

Emotional regulation involves identifying, managing and responding to emotions. It is a key part of how we learn to engage with our own experiences and develop relationships with others. Within your group, some young people will find emotional regulation challenging. It is important to be aware of this when running activities in the sessions in which young people are invited to reflect on their own perspectives and actions.



## Feeling safe

Starting on a journey to explore and develop the habits of being curious, being present and reimagining involves young people – and you as a host – feeling safe enough to express personal opinions and stories, and to listen to those of others.

When we feel threatened, embarrassed or angry, the emotional part of our brain called the amygdala takes over and puts our rational thinking on hold. It's like our brain switches to survival mode, focusing on immediate reactions rather than careful thinking. This can make it hard to regulate our emotions, stay focused or stop ourselves from acting impulsively.

For young people experiencing this defensive state, it becomes difficult to learn new things.

## A safe social space

As we welcome young people into our group, we need to create a space where they feel safe and able to be themselves. This is not something that can be done by you as a host alone – it requires involvement and collaboration with the young people.

Part of this is about setting the group culture – an essential element of Session 1. As you complete the activities in the introductory session, make sure that you prioritise what the young people say when coming up with guidelines to govern the group's culture. Avoid making assumptions – continue listening and reflecting back what you believe the young people are expressing. Think about how you can enable young people to have ownership of this process – for example, a young person could hold the pen or summarise the suggestions.

# A safe physical space

In addition to creating a space that is emotionally, mentally and spiritually safe, we need to create a space that is physically safe enough.

## Location

The space you are using may carry specific connotations for young people, influenced by its other uses. It can be beneficial to understand how the young people in your group perceive the space where you are gathering. Consider ways to enhance their sense of ownership, making it a place where the young people can relax and be themselves.

## Set-up

Think carefully about the layout of your room. How are the chairs positioned? Are some arrangements more formal/imposing? Will you use chairs, or are beanbags or floor cushions more appropriate? If you choose the latter, will everyone be able to sit down and get up comfortably? If some people in your group have limited mobility, consider how to make the room inclusive for them.

## Area to take a break

It could be helpful to designate an area as a quiet space. Sometimes discussions, activities or interactions can become overwhelming for some young people – we don't always know what may be triggering due to different experiences or circumstances. A young person might need to spend a few moments on their own in a quiet space until they feel ready to return to the group. If possible, set up a corner of your room with comfortable seating and items such as noise-cancelling headphones (for those who may not have their own) and fidget toys. It would be helpful to ask the young people what would help them most if they need to take a break. At the start of each session, remind the group that this area is available.



## Starting each session

At the start of your session, think about what your young people may need to be best able to engage. This will partly depend on where they have just come from. Some may need to need to calm down or let off steam.

### Establishing a sense of calm

If you are running an evening group after a hectic day, you may need to help the young people establish a sense of calm. Using some simple breathing exercises might be enough.

You could also try an activity such as **5, 4, 3, 2, 1**:

- 5** ask the young people to look around and find **five** things that they can see
- 4** then close their eyes and notice **four** things that they can hear
- 3** then discover **three** things that they can feel (such as the way their jumper sits on their shoulders or the pressure of a table on their elbows)
- 2** next **two** things that they can smell
- 1** finally **one** thing that they can taste

Doing activities like these allows the young people to become present by focusing on their senses.

### Letting off steam

If the young people have been sitting still for a long time immediately before the session, they may need to do something energetic. Having an active game or a moment to 'shake off' the day can help young people centre themselves and be ready to engage in something new.



## Consider accessibility

The materials are designed to be inclusive and interactive, including some movement around the room. It's essential to review each session and consider any necessary adaptations based on the needs of your group. There's a diverse range of needs that should be addressed to ensure all young people can fully participate in the course. Some things to consider are:

- Ensure that your meeting space is accessible for those with mobility issues, both in terms of reaching the venue and moving around within it. If activities involve physical movement, have a plan in place to ensure everyone can participate fully.
- For young people, with auditory impairments, consider seating them closer to you to enhance their ability to hear clearly or lip-read if applicable.
- When using visual materials, be prepared to describe them accurately and promptly for young people with visual impairments. Additionally, encourage participants to bring their braille Bibles if they use them.
- Some participants may struggle to empathise with others or understand different perspectives. Break down activities into smaller steps and provide extra support in assessing emotions. Specific guidance is provided throughout the materials to assist in these situations.
- Listening can be challenging for those who struggle with interrupting, inferring or changing topics while others are speaking. Provide additional support by reminding them of their focus and role during the sessions.
- Fidget toys or putty can be beneficial for participants who need to occupy their hands to aid concentration.
- A visual running order for the session (displayed on a flip chart or piece of paper), along with warnings/notices about activity endings, can help all participants prepare for transitions and changes.