

Challenging Antisemitism in Youth Work



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief describes five practices grounded in principles of social justice and anti-oppressive practice for youth workers to challenge antisemitism and support Jewish youth. The Evidence Brief is framed by collective liberation that recognizes systems of oppression as intertwined.

This Evidence Brief is informed by *Five Principles for Dismantling Antisemitism* by Independent Jewish Voices¹ in addition to the resources referenced.

ANTISEMITISM AND WHY IT MATTERS TO YOUTH WORK

Understanding Antisemitism

Antisemitism continues to be on the rise in communities across Ontario and globally. The number spiked after October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched an attack on Israel, killing more than 1,200 Israelis and capturing more than 200 hostages, and the subsequent response of Israeli military forces that has resulted in more than 30,000 Palestinians killed, more than 70,000 injured, and thousands missing according to local health authorities.²

Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jewish people or Jewish institutions or organizations.³ Jewish people are religiously, socially, racially, and politically diverse and should not be treated as a monolith or homogenized as a single entity – ‘the Jews’ – which can create scapegoating and targeting, providing an outlet for societal fear and anger.^{4,5}

Antisemitism is *historical* and *ongoing*. Like other systems of oppression, it is dynamic – antisemitism plays out differently across various contexts and requires analysis, critical understanding, and confrontation.⁴

Antisemitism is a **core tenet of white supremacy**,^{4,6,7} “fueling other forms of racism and strategically serving to wedge Jews apart from communities of colour”⁷ as well as other communities and groups experiencing oppression. As a distinct expression of hate working toward “the permanence of white supremacist power,”⁷ antisemitism can be understood to combine elements of religious prejudice, racist pseudo-science, cultural stereotyping, and political scapegoating.⁴

This does not mean that Jewish people are exempt from participating in or perpetuating white supremacy;⁴ as is true for all communities experiencing marginalization, someone can be part of a group experiencing oppression while still maintaining the system of oppression that is oppressing that person and others.⁴

Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

Zionism is “a nationalist movement that advocates for a homeland for the Jewish people” in Israel.⁸ Anti-Zionism can be an expression of antisemitism. However, criticism of policies of the current or former Israeli governments, including disagreements about specific military, legislative or political actions or agendas that address broader contexts and recognize that conflicts are not one-sided, is not antisemitic.

Regardless of whether Jewish youth consider their affiliation with the land of Israel as a critical part of their Jewish identity, they may experience hate due to anti-Zionism. The prevalence of **anti-Zionism** may cause stress, anxiety, and the fear of judgement, rejection, or other negative consequences for Jewish youth, which may prompt them to hide – partially or in entirety – their Jewish identity.

FIVE PRACTICES TO CHALLENGE ANTISEMITISM IN YOUTH WORK

Youth workers prioritizing social justice and collective liberation in their practice can focus on proactive strategies to challenge antisemitism and meaningfully support Jewish youth.

01. Affirm that the safety of Jewish youth is critical.

Acknowledge that Jewish people are survivors of a holocaust, and that histories of intergenerational fear and trauma may compromise feelings of safety, or complicate feelings of vulnerability, connected to Jewish identity.⁹ Youth may connect to Judaism in different ways and may experience many intersecting identities. They may be reconciling their individual, familial, and collective relationships to tradition, identity, ethnicity, and culture.⁴

Affirm the feelings of Jewish youth and create a non-judgemental space for discussions about the multiple issues – personal, relational, societal, and political – affecting their lives.

Consider raising critical consciousness with diverse youth – “the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression

that shape one’s life, and to take collective action against the status quo.”¹⁰ Youth workers can apply this approach by listening to youth, offering validation, and encouraging them to reflect on the broader political and social context(s) of their lived experiences, a process that can facilitate a sense of agency and community in response to feelings of abandonment, isolation, fear, and helplessness.¹¹

Avoid responding to fear of harm or violence through surveillance or law enforcement. Proactively investing in and promoting “strategies, practices, and plans that build protection and safety for all our communities”¹¹ and de-escalating moments of crisis are preferable approaches to engaging the police, which can inadvertently put young people in danger through forceful, coercive, and often violent interventions.^{12,1}

02. Avoid isolating antisemitism from other forms of oppression.

Challenging antisemitism is part of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive approach that acknowledges and proactively resists systemic racism and oppression in practice and policy. Affirm young people’s individual lived experiences, while working from the principle “that oppression is intersectional and that justice is indivisible.”¹ Be open to the various forms and roots of antisemitism, while acknowledging other influences or forms of oppression and intersections that may be at play. Because antisemitism is also embedded in white supremacy, it is “part of the machinery

of division and fear used to keep us isolated and vulnerable — the same machinery that is used to target Black people and other people of colour, people who are Muslim, immigrants, Indigenous communities, and others.”¹

Practicing from a framework of collective liberation encourages **solidarity** as a *political*, rather than charitable, act – as “mutual aid between forces fighting for the same objective.”^{13,14} Challenging antisemitism, then, cannot be isolated from efforts to challenge racism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and other systemic forces that play out in the lives of youth and their families and communities.

03. Practice meaningful allyship and challenge political ideologies that stir up racism, hate, and fear.

Engage in meaningful allyship to challenge antisemitism.^{4,15}

- Be aware of adultism (the negative stereotyping of young people) and talk to Jewish youth about what support they need.
- Build and centre relationships with Jewish communities.
- Invite, uplift, and amplify Jewish representation – making space for Jewish youth from different backgrounds and with different and diverse affiliations – in your solidarity work, and make space for youth to share their ideas and experiences first.

- Continue learning (and unlearning) about Judaism, recognizing and being open to the range of ways that youth experience their Jewish identities, and learn about antisemitism and its intersections with other forms of oppression; stay in the ‘now’, rather than recounting work from the distant past.
- Condemn all forms of antisemitism in professional and personal spaces: refuse to condone hate, correct stereotypes and misconceptions, and call-in potential allies.
- Recognize that Jews are not homogenous – they are a diverse group. Jewish people are multi-racial, multi-cultural, and share intersectional identities with others experiencing marginalization and challenging anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, anti-Indigeneity, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression.⁴
- Join local organizing efforts to challenge and dismantle antisemitism, fascism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

Being an ally means *taking action*. Actively resisting antisemitism involves refusing and challenging prejudicial, hateful, fascist, white nationalist, and far-right ideologies, including the “conspiratorial and dangerous beliefs [that] are wielded to divide and sow fear across communities, and to reinforce and maintain white supremacy.”¹ Challenge these beliefs in practice with diverse youth, families, and communities.

04. Create spaces that affirm and celebrate all expressions of cultural and religious life.

Embrace, rather than merely tolerate, cultural and religious diversity in youth work spaces through both policy and practice. Reflect the diversity of the young people in your community. Because “[w]hite Christian hegemony structures many of our societies, lives, relationships, and institutions ... framing all communities that are not white and Christian as the ‘other’ ... feeds exploitation, hatred, and discrimination.”¹ Strive to co-create policies and “affirming, inclusive spaces where Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and all other faith communities can thrive and belong.”¹ Fostering community across difference can facilitate healing and challenge divisive and oppressive forces, including antisemitism.

05. Make undoing all forms of racism and bigotry both policy and daily practice.

Similarly, establish justice, inclusion, and equity as the guiding principles for the design and development of youth programs, and in organizational policy- and decision-making.¹ Strive to “create open spaces, rooted in the fabric of daily practice, for anti-racist educational initiatives, curriculums, and frameworks;”¹ these efforts can then support transformational action against white supremacy – including the oppressive forces of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Black racism – at the program, agency, organizational, and institutional levels.

ENDNOTES

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