

## Discussion starters: Living in a multi-faith society

### Aims:

These resources aim to build young people's confidence in discussing their own beliefs and opinions. They suggest discussion topics that will help them to develop skills of listening, empathy and debate. Many of the topics raised have the potential to be controversial. These activities aim to develop young people's ability to disagree without falling out. They ask young people to consider a wide range of issues relating to religion and its role in society. They challenge them to think deeply about the benefits and challenges of living in a multi-faith society.

The following pages contain topics and prompts for discussion. A teacher or youth worker will need to act as a facilitator to manage the subsequent debates.

The following pages contain:

- Agreement lines. These are useful warm-up activities and conversation starters.
- Scenarios: These help bring complex issues to life and help students to empathise with different viewpoints.
- Group discussion framework: This sets out a suggestion for how some of these issues and activities can be incorporated into a structured discussion framework.

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## Agreement lines

Time: 15 minutes (but could be much longer)  
Equipment: A large room without too much furniture.

Method:

- The statements below can be debated as 'agreement lines.' An imaginary line is drawn across the room, from 'Agree' in one corner to 'Disagree' in the other. Students stand along the line to illustrate their viewpoint. Ask the students to back up their position with reasons and begin a discussion of the issue.
- As an alternative, students can choose one of three positions along the line: 'Agree', 'Disagree' or 'Undecided'. Students in the first two groups have to argue their case and try to recruit as many of the 'undecideds' to their team as possible. The biggest team at the end wins the game.

Agreement lines get people moving, and can generate a lot of debate and discussion. They involve the whole group and so can be a good way of including less confident participants in sharing their opinions. Agreement lines also demonstrate the opinions of the whole group visually.

Choose as many statements as you have time for, and ask different students to explain their opinions. You might want to warm up with a few silly statements first, to get the young people familiar with the idea of the game. You can then progress to more sensitive and controversial issues. For example:

*I hate marmite.*

*Pete will win Big Brother (or something similar from a current popular TV show).*

*I love going to school.*

What do you think?

AGREE-----?-----DISAGREE

### Suggested statements

1. I feel confident in talking about my beliefs and values.
2. I would like to know more about people from different faiths and backgrounds.
3. I am intimidated by people who are different from me.
4. It is easier to be friends with people who have the same beliefs as you.
5. Parents try too hard to make their children follow their religion and don't let them choose for themselves.

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## Scenarios

These scenarios prompt discussion about living in a multi-faith society. Some of the issues might raise controversial or sensitive topics, but Diversity and Dialogue have found them to be good ways to engage young people in debate. However, certain topics will be more appropriate for certain groups.

These scenarios address issues such as homosexuality, abortion, religious dress codes, dietary requirements and interfaith relationships. They can be used to get young people thinking about how best to deal with differences of opinion and about how to act without offending others.

### Activity one: Discussing the scenarios

Time: 15 minutes

Equipment: copies of the scenarios below

Method:

- Divide the young people into small groups and give each group one or two scenarios from the worksheet below. Make sure that each group has different scenarios. Ask them to focus on the following questions:
  - What is happening?
  - Where are the potential disagreements?
  - Who is in the right and who is in the wrong?
  - What role does religion play in the situation?
  - What do you think will happen next?
- Does everyone in the group have the same opinions? Ask the group to think about what affects their opinions - they should consider the impact of their religious beliefs and their personal values and experiences.
- Ask each group to feedback their ideas to the rest of the group and talk through the issues raised together.

### Activity two: Acting up

Time: 35 minutes

Equipment: copies of the scenarios below

Method:

- In groups of three or four, ask the young people to select one of the scenarios that they discussed in the previous exercise. Ask them to imagine that they are the characters in the scenario and that they have to carry on the scene. Extra group members can invent additional characters to join in the discussion and genders and religions can be flexible!
- Each group should rehearse for about 15 minutes and then act out their scenarios to each other.
- Afterwards, discuss the different scenarios, focussing on some of the following questions:
  - Where did the characters agree and disagree?
  - Who behaved well and who behaved badly?

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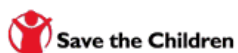
- What happened and why? Did the drama end in conflict or reconciliation?
- How did the characters react to differences of opinion? Which was the most effective way and which had the best end result?
- How could the scenario have played out differently?

It may also be interesting to challenge the group to make up their own scenarios, perhaps based on real situations that they have encountered.

Some of these scenarios have been adapted from experiences related to us by young people during the Diversity and Dialogue project.

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## Activity one and two: Scenarios

1. A girl from a Sikh family is told that she will be getting married at the end of the year. She will be going to India to marry a second cousin that she hasn't met before. A friend tells her she is being 'pre-historic' to go along with it and that she should rebel against her parents.
2. A 15 year old Catholic girl tells her friends that she thinks she might be pregnant and one friend gives her the number of an abortion helpline. Her brother overhears the conversation and yells at her, saying that their religion forbids abortion.
3. A girl tells her Muslim friend that she should stop wearing her hijab (headscarf). She says that it makes her look like a terrorist.
4. A boy has decided to become a vegetarian. At lunch, he brings out pictures of animals being slaughtered whilst his friends are eating their burgers.
5. A Jewish girl wants to marry her Muslim boyfriend. Her family wasn't very happy that she was going out with a Muslim boy, but is really angry and upset that she wants to marry him. They say that she must marry a Jewish boy.
6. A Christian boy tells some of his close friends that he thinks he is gay. One of his friends tells him that this means he will go to hell. The boy is very upset.
7. A non-religious boy goes to school wearing a T-shirt that says 'There is no God'. A group of Christians corner him at lunch break and tell him to take it off.
8. A Muslim boy is at a party with his friends. Some of the others in the party are having a beer and they offer him one, too. When he refuses they tell him that he is "no fun".
9. A Buddhist boy is eating lunch at a school event. He asks the teacher if the food is all vegetarian, and she says yes. He starts eating and finds some pieces of chicken in the salad. He is upset as he ate a piece by mistake.
10. A Muslim boy complains that he has been stopped and searched by the Police seven times in the past year. Another student says that he shouldn't complain. The Police are targeting Muslims to prevent another terrorist attack and it is better to be safe than sorry.
11. A student's brother is fighting in the British Army in Iraq. Some students say that the brother is a torturer and murderer, fighting an illegal war. The student is proud of her brother and feels very upset.
12. A girl is eating a chocolate bar and her friend asks whether it is fairtrade. She says no, because fairtrade chocolate is too expensive. Her friend tells her she's not as poor as the farmers producing the coca in the developing world so should spend the extra money on fairtrade products.

## PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:



## Group discussion framework

Diversity and Dialogue have run the following discussion session with groups of year 10 students in eleven different schools in London, Blackburn, Manchester, Birmingham and Slough. The questions engaged the participants and provoked a lot of debate.

This session could be run in a school or youth group setting. It is currently aimed at a multi-faith group of young people, attending a mixed faith school. However, we also ran a slightly adapted session successfully with single faith groups of young people.

It uses some of the statements and scenarios that have been outlined in the previous pages and suggests a way of incorporating them into a structured discussion.

The session is divided into three sections and aims to cover the following issues:

### 1. Religion and beliefs

- Sharing personal beliefs and values.
- Similarities, differences and the acceptance of difference.
- Different ways in which religion can influence people's lives.
- The role of religion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.

### 2. In school

- Opinions on going to a school where there are students with different religious beliefs.
- Relationships between young people from different religions within the school.
- The role of the school in promoting good interfaith relations.

### 3. In the wider community

- Relationships between different religious groups in the wider community.
- Predictions on whether relations will get better or worse in the future.
- Influences on interfaith relations in the UK.
- Global issues and their impact on local community relations.
- Solutions.

The discussion session:

Time: 1 hour

Equipment: none

Method:

This is a flexible discussion framework that can be adapted to suit different groups and situations. We have used it with groups of between 10-15 young people, sitting round in a circle. Try to create a comfortable and informal atmosphere that encourages all participants to contribute. It may help to set ground rules. If it is difficult to sustain a focussed conversation, then perhaps make a rule that participants can only speak when holding a ball, or other object. We did not find this necessary, however.

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*If you are religious then you have a stronger sense of who you are.*

Ask the group to think about whether religion provides a strong sense of community and belonging. What else defines who you are? Do the religious and non-religious young people agree?

*Religion gives you rules to follow, so you're not as free to live your own life.*

Are religious rules helpful or restrictive? Do non-religious people have moral rules too?

*Religion causes conflict because different religions will always be rivals.*

Where does religion cause conflict? Eg. Middle East, Northern Ireland. Have these conflicts really been caused by religion? Is religion a cause of conflict locally? Does religion teach about peace?

**In school:**

Time: 15 minutes

- Ask the young people for their thoughts on going to a school where there are students with a variety of religious beliefs. Do they like this about the school?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of going to a school with just people from their own religion?
- Why do they think some parents choose to send their children to single faith schools?
- Do different religions get on well in the school? Go around the room and ask each participant to mark interfaith relations in their school on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is the best).
- Draw out any examples of problems and reasons why things work well.
- If any tensions are mentioned, ask the young people them to think of the best ways of dealing with them.
- What role does the school play in creating good relationships between students? What could the school do better? For example, through Religious Education.

**In the wider community:**

Time: 20 minutes

- Do they think relationships between people from different faiths and backgrounds in your local community are better or worse than in their school? Why?
- How do they think global issues affect relations between different religions in this country? For example, conflicts in the Middle East, incidents such as the printing of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.
- What else might affect relationships?
- Do the students think that relationships between people from different faiths and backgrounds will get better or worse in the future?  
Go around the circle, asking each participant to label themselves either 'optimist' or 'pessimist' and to give a reason for their answer.
- Trevor Philips, (Director of the Commission for Racial Equality) commented that 'we are sleepwalking our way to a segregated society'. Is this true?
- Do you think people will become more and more mixed as time goes on, or will people always want a degree of segregation?

If the group is talkative then they may well discuss these issues for the whole 20 minutes. However, if the group is less talkative then it may be useful to use the scenarios below.

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*We commit ourselves,  
in a spirit of friendship and co-operation,  
to work together  
alongside all who share our values and ideals,  
to help bring about a better world  
now and for generations to come.*

- Challenge the young people to come up with their own statement of unity. This could work as a motto for their school or local area and could be written as a poem, rap or song. They might consider the following elements:
  - What kind of world they want to live in
  - What kind of problems they would like to solve
  - What values they all share
  - How they would like people to act towards each other
- Ask each participant to write down one thing that they pledge to do themselves to realise their shared statement.  
Eg. Ask a friend from a different religion to take you to their place of worship.  
Read a story from each of the main religious texts.  
Smile at people on the bus!  
Help your neighbour clean up their garden.

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