

Courageous Conversations Toolkit



IT'S TIME TO TALK

Who do you turn to when things feel tough? How do you process your own big feelings? Who do you have to talk to?

No matter who we are - young or old - we all need someone to talk to.

Talking helps us to process our thoughts and feelings. It helps us to explore some of the overwhelm we may be feeling. It helps us to strengthen our emotional resilience. And it helps to build connection.

The simple, powerful qualities of conversation cannot be underestimated in helping to strengthen our resilience, wellbeing and feeling of empowerment.

The Problem

It may seem overwhelming to know how to start talking about some of the complex - and in some cases existential- crises we are facing in the 21st century. Yet research shows us time and again that we have to start talking about these issues - in particular with children and young people.

In 2021, a collective of psychologists, psychiatrists and academics ran the largest scientific study of its kind into mental health and the climate crisis, with 75% of 10,000 young people surveyed saying they think *the future is frightening*. At the same time, a report from UK charity Mind reveals a growing numbers of young people experiencing mental health problems on a daily basis and feeling stuck, overwhelmed or alone.

“Talking and supporting young people to explore some of the big issues facing people and planet is essential to their emotional health and wellbeing”.

The challenges of our VUCA world are showing up in children’s behaviour, preoccupations, dreams, and uncertainty about their futures. At a time when there are seemingly ever-more things happening to make us feel overwhelmed and anxious, having a safe place to be talking about what’s happening in the world is essential. For all of us, no matter our age.

Our Approach

At ThoughtBox, we’ve long worked alongside practitioners in this space to design programmes based around the social-emotional needs of young people; helping to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to create and sustain a thriving world.

- Our curriculum is discussion based and exploratory *because* of our understanding that this is how to approach and address so many of the complex and overwhelming issues we’re facing.
- We’ve designed our training courses to empower teachers with emotional resilience in their own lives to then enable young people to have their needs met in this space – the need to feel safe, heard, know that they matter and know what they can do to respond.

Helping move from anxiety to empowerment lies at the heart of all of our approach – but this only happens when we start facing the issues that are affecting us all.

So where do we start? How can we even begin to know what to say when we don’t know many of the answers ourselves?

A toolkit for Courageous Conversations

It’s not about the knowing the answers, it’s about allowing the questions. It begins with opening the conversations and recognising that we’re in this together. Let’s look at three elements to consider when bringing courageous conversations into the classroom or home environment:

BE SAFE

BE BRAVE

BE CONNECTED



“ThoughtBox offers a really practical usable framework, models what connection and wellbeing actually feel like and empowers teachers and students together.”

Jo McAndrews
Climate Psychology Alliance

Making space for emotions is important when exploring the big issues of our time. Whilst they may be inconvenient, they need to be welcomed into the conversations – especially with young people. All of our emotions will fluctuate as we navigate the road ahead. Some of us may feel anger or frustration, fear or overwhelm, motivation and excitement, apathy or overwhelm. All of these emotions are welcome and part of our response to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

The work starts with us facing up to our own thoughts and feelings; recognising that we don't need to know the answers or solve the issues that young people are thinking about – we simply need to create a space to talk.

Part of our work as teachers is recognising that we'll all be feeling very different things at different times and are coming into these conversations from different contexts – and that's OK. We also need to recognise that we – as adults – are not immune from feeling these same big feelings. These issues are global and systemic and will affect us all.

These times call on all of us to be really brave and really human.

Welcome the questions

You don't need to be able to answer the questions or solve these problems but young people's questions need a space to be heard, explored and discussed together. It's OK to say "I don't know" – in fact it's a strength! And allows you to explore ideas together with a learner's mind.

Welcome the emotions

Thoughts and feelings are as significant as the facts and figures of learning. You don't need to do anything with the emotions raised more than acknowledge them. Welcome your own emotions too – it is healthy to be modelling human responses to the issues we're all facing.

Facilitate – don't teach

Appreciate your role - you are not the expert here, but instead you are facilitating the learning. You are not 'telling' answers but instead helping to explore questions. Try entering discussions with a learner's mind to explore the ideas together with your students.

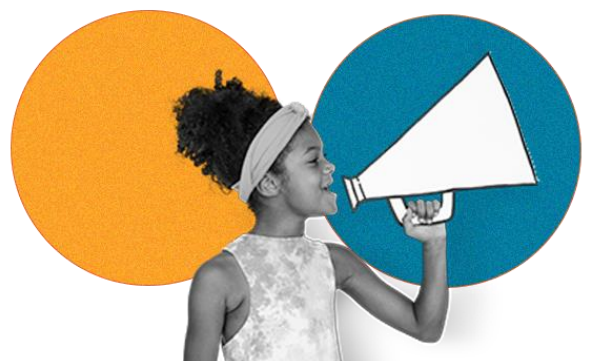
REMEMBER:

Rather than teaching the lesson, your role is to facilitate the learning and the discussions that emerge. In these conversations, students' knowledge, opinions and beliefs are as important as those of the teacher and it's a wonderful opportunity to enter the discussion with a learner's mind.

Facilitation is a different skill to teaching. Your role is not to know the answers but to guide the discussions, and to give children's voices a chance to be heard.

TOP TIP!

Sit at the same level as your students to remove any unspoken sense of assumed knowledge or authority.



Part of the process for courageous conversations involves creating a safe space for young people to be able to talk freely and share their thoughts and feelings, knowing they are all welcome into the discussion.

Whilst the issues facing people and planet are going to impact us all in some way, we are all coming from very different contexts. Even within a classroom, every student will arrive into a conversation from a very different place, influenced for example by their family context, their emotions, their background, their resilience or their levels of awareness about particular issues.

You may wish to consider creating a 'class charter' or agreement that everyone abides by to set clear discussion guidelines. It is a great idea to create these together with your students – and then display them on the classroom wall.

You may already have guidance for holding discussions and debates within your learning community. If not, here are **five agreements for safe and brave conversations** to get you started:

1. **Free of judgment** - Different opinions are valid and welcome! Allow for controversy and diversity by showing curiosity and respect. Encourage students to use evidence and provide rationale for their points.
2. **Active listening** - Listen carefully to what others are saying - even when you disagree with what is being said. Try to hear things from their perspective.
3. **Conscious challenges** - Challenge or criticise *ideas*, not people. Pull the statement away from the speaker and hold it up for scrutiny. This allows you to critique the idea, not the person who spoke it.
4. **All voices welcome** - Vary the processes of discussion (group, pairs, talking stick) to allow all voices to be heard in every discussion.
5. **Respect** - Distinguish between challenge and aggression. Recognise our opinions are shaped by our contexts and our beliefs, and that they are all different because of that. There is rarely a 'right answer' in these discussions.

REMEMBER:

We're in the same storm, but in very different boats. The issues affecting people and planet will resonate differently with each individual, and impact us all in a different way.

Creating a safe space means allowing different voices, opinions and feelings to be expressed – whilst also ensuring that inappropriate comments and ideas are challenged.

- Don't be afraid to hold up ideas to be challenged or questioned – but remember to hold up the *idea*, not the person who has shared it.

TOP TIP!

Think about the layout of the room. Rather than sitting in rows facing the front, think about sitting in a circle, or sitting around tables facing each other.



One of the biggest causes of overwhelm for many in these times is the complexity of the challenges and opportunities ahead. It can seem daunting when looking at how many issues we're facing, and how varied they all are. However, the issues we're facing are all interconnected and systemic. Focusing on one issue actually plays a part in changing other issues which may not initially seem to be related.

Introducing young people to the practice of systems thinking – of finding the connections – is a hugely empowering process to move from anxiety to empowerment. It allows us to find simplicity in the complexity of a VUCA world – and helps to see how we can take small actions to contribute to wider-level change. [Here](#) is a short video for all ages introducing how systems thinking works.

Focus on action

Encourage young people to focus their energy on something they feel connected to and interested in. They may wish to join an advocacy group, start a campaign, change a habit or share their knowledge – help them to focus on taking action with short term achievable outcomes.

Build community

To face the challenges and opportunities of our time, we need to work together to strengthen our resilience, community and support. Help young people to 'find their tribe' and be part of something bigger than themselves. This advice is key for all of us to follow!

Practice active hope

There are millions of people and organisations working to create a thriving future for people and planet. Help tell the story of 'active hope' – of taking action towards a more positive horizon. Share the stories of change with your students to give them a vision of a thriving and energising future.



REMEMBER:

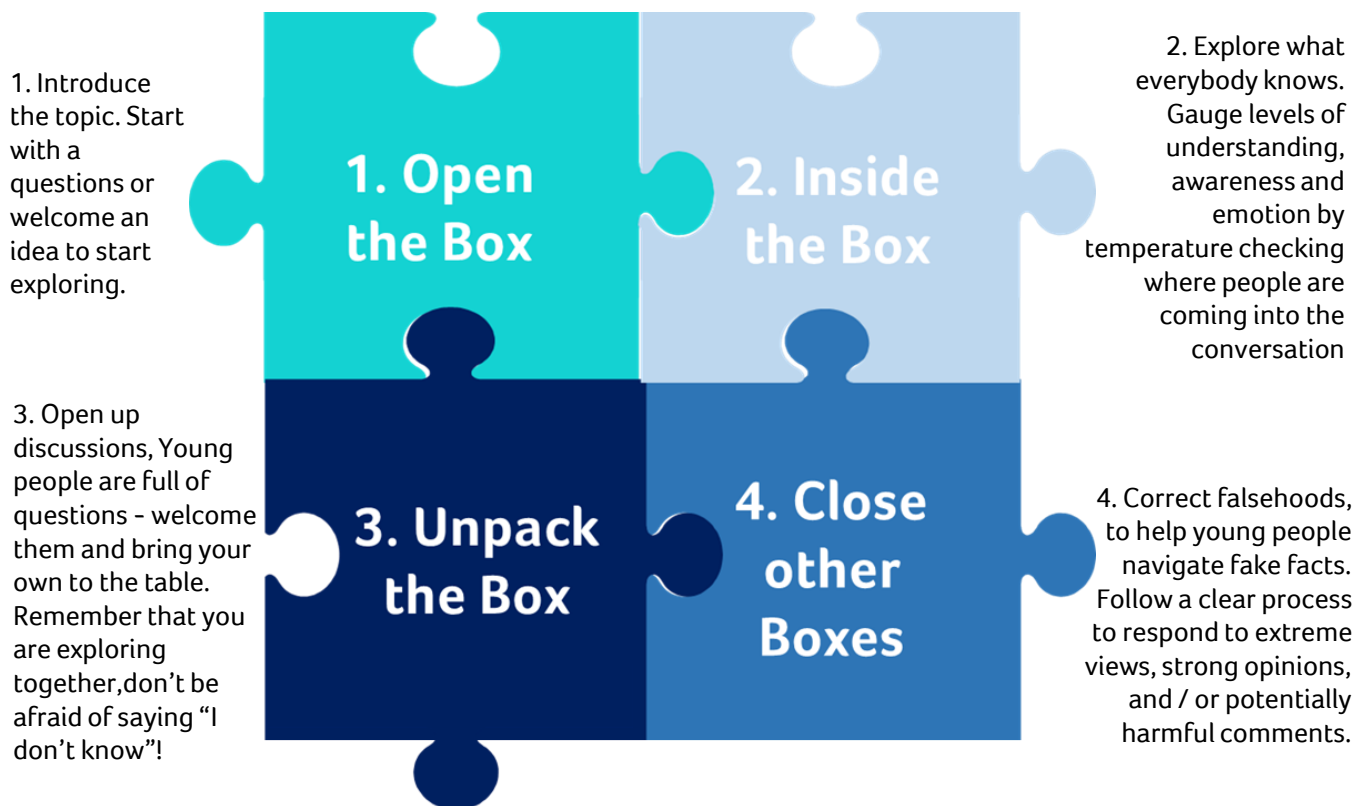
We are affected by all of the same issues facing young people. These same levels of guidance apply to us all. Our own emotional state matters to the conversation – so make sure to check in with yourself as well as the students when exploring the topic on the table.

- How are you feeling and responding?
- What questions do you have?
- Who are you talking to?
- Where are you finding support?
- How are you taking action and feeling empowered?

TOP TIP!

Reinforce the importance of being active - and why *doing something* matters - by connecting to ideas, people and organisations who are 'being the change'. This helps to direct energies and move from a space of anxiety and overwhelm into one of empowerment and activation.

If you want to be holding your own courageous conversations, here's our simple process for healthy discussions:



5. Outside the Box

5. Have clear next steps and invitations to continue the conversations and reflections and take action in a particular area of Self-Care, People-Care and / or Earth-Care.

✓ **Good news!**
Young people want to talk about these issues (in fact, most already are) so will welcome your bravery.

✓ **Better news!**
Talking and discussing is a vital life skill – it helps support and strengthen wellbeing and resilience and build relationships and connections.

✓ **Great news!**
ThoughtBox has been designed to help you have these courageous conversations. Our discussion-based curriculum is designed to help explore a wide range of topics and issues affecting people and planet – with content, questions and resources to support learning levels of every school-aged child,

Explore over 400 lessons in which every student's voice is heard and every voice matters:
www.thoughtboxeducation.com/curriculum

Be brave enough to start a
conversation that matters.

