Talking With Elementary-Aged Children After an Antisemitic Hate Symbol Incident

A Guide for Families

Children often experience events like this differently than adults. Some will not notice at all. Some will hear older students talking, see adults reacting, or come home with questions. Some will feel confused, worried, upset, or unsafe. Some may repeat words or symbols they do not fully understand.

This guide is here to help families navigate those conversations in calm, honest, developmentally appropriate ways.

You Do Not Need the Perfect Response

Children benefit most from adults who are:

- calm
- honest
- grounded
- willing to listen
- clear about values

You do not need to explain everything at once. Younger children often need simple explanations and reassurance more than they need detailed history.

Start by Listening

Before explaining, begin with curiosity.

You might ask:

- *"What did you hear?"*
- *"What are kids saying about it?"*
- *"What did you think or feel when you heard?"*
- *"Do you have any questions?"*

Children sometimes know far less than adults imagine. Other times, they have absorbed misinformation from peers, older students, YouTube, gaming spaces, or social media. Listening first helps you understand what your child actually needs.

A Simple Explanation for Younger Children (PK–2)

You might say:

> *"Someone drew a symbol that was used a long time ago to hurt people, especially Jewish people. At our school, we believe everyone should feel safe, respected, and welcome."*

You do not need to go into war, death, or violence unless your child asks.

A Fuller Explanation for Older Elementary Students (Grades 3–5)

You might say:

> *"The swastika is a symbol the Nazis used. They were a group of people in Germany who believed some people mattered more than others, and they caused terrible harm to many people, especially Jewish people. That history is part of why seeing this symbol is so serious. People still use it today to make others afraid, or to make groups of people turn against each other."*

Older children may want to know more. Answer honestly, in small pieces, and let their questions guide you.

If Your Child Asks: "What Is a Nazi?"

A developmentally appropriate response might be:

> *"Nazis were a group of people in Germany, about 80 years ago, who spread hatred and treated many people cruelly because of who they were. Many people were hurt and killed, including millions of Jewish people. That part of history is called the Holocaust. People still learn about it so it does not happen again."*

You do not need to go further than your child asks. If they have more questions, answer them honestly and at their level.

If Your Child Says "It Was Just a Joke"

This is one of the most common things kids say, and it deserves a thoughtful response rather than alarm.

Children this age are developmentally drawn to shock value, edgy humor, and symbols that get a big reaction from peers or adults. Most kids who repeat hateful symbols are not expressing ideology, they are testing reactions, signaling belonging to a peer group, or copying something they saw online. That does not make the harm smaller. The symbol still does what symbols do, no matter what was in the head of the child who drew it. The conversation, then, is about impact, learning, and repair.

You might say:

> *"I believe you that you didn't mean it the way it sounds. But this symbol has a real history of hurting people, and using it as a joke can make Jewish kids, or any kid, feel unsafe at school. The 'why' behind it matters less than how it lands for the people who see it."*

The goal is not to convey panic or shame. The goal is helping children understand impact and develop empathy.

If Your Child Heard Other Kids Talking About It

This is probably the most common scenario, your child wasn't the one who drew it and didn't see it, but heard kids on the bus, at lunch, or at recess talking, joking, or speculating.

This is a real moment for your child, even if they are not personally involved. They may be:

- unsure what to do when kids joke about it
- worried about getting in trouble for saying something
- curious but afraid to ask questions at school
- copying language without understanding it

You might say:

> *"It can be hard when kids are joking about something serious and you're not sure what to do. You don't have to lecture anyone, but you also don't have to laugh. Sometimes saying 'that's not funny' or just walking away is enough. And you can always tell a teacher or come tell me."*

This is also a good moment to ask, gently:

> *"Have you ever heard kids say things about Jewish people, or other groups, that didn't sit right with you?"*

If Your Child Drew the Symbol or Repeated It

Take a breath before reacting.

Elementary-aged children are still learning. They often imitate peers, experiment with symbols, or repeat things they have seen online or heard from others without understanding the meaning. A strong reaction from you is understandable, and it can also shut the conversation down before any real learning happens.

Helpful steps include:

- asking where they saw or learned it
- staying curious instead of immediately punitive
- clearly explaining why the symbol is harmful and what it represents
- naming family and school values

- talking about impact: who might have seen it, how they might have felt
- thinking together about repair: what could your child do now?

Children are more likely to grow when adults combine accountability with connection and learning. A child who feels shamed will hide; a child who feels guided will think.

Reassuring Children About Safety

Children look to adults to know how worried they should be.

Helpful things to say:

- *"The adults at school are taking this seriously."*
- *"Your school is working to make sure everyone feels safe."*
- *"You can always talk to me or another trusted adult."*
- *"This is something people can work on and change - and we do, together."*

Children also have good ideas to share about how to make things feel more safe. It's worth asking them if they have ideas about what they might want to do.

For Jewish Families

You don't need this guide to tell you what a swastika means or why it lands the way it does. You have likely been having versions of this conversation with your children, or with yourselves, for a long time.

We want to name a few things directly:

- We see this for what it is. Even when no Jewish child was directly named, a swastika is a targeted symbol with a specific history and a specific present.
- Your children's safety and sense of belonging are not an afterthought in our community's response.
- You know your child best. Some Jewish children will want to talk; some will go quiet; some will want their identity acknowledged at school; some will want privacy. There is no single right way to support them.
- If there is anything that would help - a conversation, a check-in, a specific accommodation, time to talk with a staff member who shares your family's background - please reach out. We can be a support.

For Children Who May Feel Personally Affected

Beyond Jewish families, other children may carry this incident more heavily, like children who already feel different, vulnerable, or targeted in some way, or children who are sensitive to questions of fairness and harm.

They may not say so directly. Some may become:

- quieter than usual
- anxious about school
- angry
- withdrawn
- worried about fairness or safety

It can help to gently check in:

- *"How are you feeling about what happened?"*
- *"Did anything about this make you feel uncomfortable or worried?"*
- *"Is there anything you want the adults at school to know?"*

Harder Questions Children Sometimes Ask

"Why would someone do that?"

> *"I don't know exactly why this person did it. Sometimes people do hurtful things because they're angry, or because they think it's funny, or because they don't understand the harm. And sometimes people use symbols like this on purpose to scare others, or to make groups of people turn against each other. Usually it isn't really about the people the symbol targets at all. It's about someone trying to make others afraid."*

"Am I safe?"

> *"Yes. What happened was upsetting, but you are safe at school. The grown-ups are paying close attention and working to make sure everyone is okay."*

"Why does antisemitism exist?"

> *"That's a big question, and one people have been asking for a long time. There is no good reason. There is never a good reason for hate. What we can do is learn, and care about people, and stand up when we see something wrong."*

You can always say: *"I don't know, but that's a good question. Let's think about it together."*

Building Empathy and Belonging at Home

Moments like this can become opportunities for learning. Families can support children by:

- modeling respectful language
- interrupting jokes or stereotypes that target groups of people
- encouraging curiosity about people who are different from them
- helping children practice speaking up when something feels hurtful or unfair
- reinforcing that everyone deserves dignity and belonging

One small practice: at dinner this week, ask your child *"Did you notice anyone being left out today? Did you notice anyone being kind?"* Small noticing builds bigger awareness.

It Is Okay to Learn Alongside Your Child

Many adults did not grow up having open conversations about antisemitism, bias, racism, or identity. It is okay to learn as you go. The kind of community where this kind of biased event doesn't happen is something we build together - through how we talk, who we stand with, what we notice, what we refuse to laugh at. Children are part of that building. What matters most is creating a home where they know:

- questions are welcome
- harm should be taken seriously
- people deserve care and dignity
- this is something we work on together

Helpful Resources for Families

Facing History & Ourselves: Resources for Talking to Students About Antisemitism

https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/antisemitism-resource-collection

A thoughtful guide for adults supporting children about antisemitism.

EmbraceRace

embracerace.org

Resources to support conversations about fairness, bias, identity, and belonging with children.

Learning for Justice — Family Resources

learningforjustice.org

Practical resources for helping children develop empathy, respect, and inclusion.