June 2026

Supporting Children and Young People After Racialised Violence

Introduction

In the summer of 2024, following the murder of three children in Southport, false claims circulated online that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker. Over the following week, racialised violence spread across many towns and cities in England and Northern Ireland, including Belfast, Middlesbrough, Rotherham, Sunderland and Hull. Crowds attacked mosques and hotels accommodating people seeking asylum, and targeted people who were visibly Muslim or assumed to be migrants. It was the most serious outbreak of racist disorder on British streets for a generation (Burnett, 2026).

Through 2025, anti-immigration, anti-migrant and anti-asylum protests have continued in towns including Epping and Southampton, and in many other places since. These protests have often focused on hotels accommodating people seeking asylum, and many again turned to intimidation and violence. The immediate triggers vary from place to place, but the available evidence suggests a consistent underlying pattern: local anger is directed at racialised and migrant communities, and amplified by organised far-right activity and by disinformation online.

For those of us working in education, these events raise immediate questions about the safety and well-being of children, families and staff in our care. Some children saw the violence at first hand, in their own neighbourhoods or outside places of worship. Many more encountered it on their phones, often before any adult could help them make sense of it. This document is written to support schools as pupils, families and colleagues continue to live with the aftermath, and with the ongoing risk of further violence.

It has three aims:

1. **Raise awareness** among school leaders of the issues affecting children after racialised violence.
2. **Develop understanding** of how these events reach children, including those who were not directly involved.
3. **Identify practical strategies** that schools can use to support pupils, families and staff.

The recommendations set out are grounded in research. Studies of vicarious racism, including a systematic review by Heard-Garris et al (2018), show that children can be harmed by racism experienced second hand, through a parent's distress or through what they see in the media, without having been direct targets themselves. The UK Trauma Council's synthesis (2022) on racism, mental health and trauma describes how such experiences can share features with complex trauma. Analysis by the Institute of Race Relations (Burnett, 2026) places the 2024 violence, and the unrest that has continued since, within a longer pattern of racist hostility rather than treating it as an isolated outbreak of disorder.

School leaders are encouraged to share this resource with staff, governors and trust leaders. It is a starting point, intended to prompt reflection and local conversation. We strongly recommend that it is used alongside the National Education Union's Anti-Racism Charter, the Runnymede Trust's work on race and racism in schools, and the work of community-led organisations such as Kids of Colour and The Black Curriculum.

Children do not experience racialised violence equally.

1. NAMING RACISM AND THE QUESTION OF IMPARTIALITY

The Department for Education's 2022 guidance on political impartiality is concerned with how schools handle genuinely contested political questions, and some colleagues will reasonably ask whether the subject of racism sits comfortably with a school's duty of political impartiality. Indeed, the guidance treats opposition to racism as "the basic shared principle that racism is unacceptable, which is a view schools should reinforce", and the wider legal framework requires schools to act.

For example, the public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010 requires schools to advance equality of opportunity, foster good relations between different groups, and tackle discrimination and harassment. Keeping Children Safe in Education (Department for Education, 2025) makes the welfare of every child, including protection from discriminatory harm, the responsibility of all staff. Under Ofsted's inspection framework (revised November 2025), 'Inclusion and Personal Development and Well-being' are evaluation areas in their own right, and inspectors look for an environment in which all pupils feel they belong. Taken together, these duties demonstrate that supporting a child who has been targeted because of their race or faith, and being clear that such targeting is wrong, is part of a school's ordinary obligations, not an optional or activist addition to them.

It also helps to separate two things that are easily run together. The first is naming racism and supporting affected children. This is a settled duty, and it is not politically contested in the sense the guidance points to. The second is the wider analysis of why this violence happens, including its roots in policy and public rhetoric. That analysis is offered here to aid understanding, and we think it is well founded, but a school does not need to adopt any particular account of the causes in order to act. The recommendations in this document stand on the first basis alone. A school can be wholehearted in protecting its pupils while remaining measured about contested political questions.

While there may be debate about why the protests and violence happen, that is quite separate from the clear principle that racism is wrong. Supporting children who have been targeted is not a breach of political impartiality, but part of our duties under equality and safeguarding law, and the Department for Education's own guidance treats opposition to racism as a shared value rather than a partisan position.

Being clear that racism is wrong, and supporting a child that feels targeted, is part of our safeguarding and equality duties (Equality Act 2010; Keeping Children Safe in Education). The Department for Education's own impartiality guidance describes opposition to racism as a shared principle that schools 'should reinforce'. This is not a partisan position.

2. A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

We use the term 'racialised violence' deliberately. To describe violence as racialised is to recognise that people were targeted because of how they were racially perceived, including assumptions about their faith, their origins or their migration status. The Southport attacker was born in Britain, yet was falsely cast as a Muslim and a migrant, and those subsequently attacked were chosen on the same basis. To name this as racism is significant for children, in that it tells those who were targeted that the adults around them understand what happened to them.

We use 'racially minoritised' to refer to children and families who are made into minorities through social and political processes, and we name Islamophobia and anti-migrant hostility specifically where they apply. Schools may wish to adapt and extend this language.

Where protests draw on religious or national symbolism, such as the St George's cross, the cross, and crusader imagery to claim that some people belong and others do not, we specifically name this as Christian-nationalist framing. Whilst doing this, we ensure that young people understand that the use of those symbols does not in itself make a protest representative of Christian theology, belief or practice.

3. Centring Community Voice

Guidance of this kind is strongest when it is rooted in the voices of the communities impacted. We offer our thanks to the contributors below for their support in creating this guidance and their thoughtful reflections.

Imam Muhammad Rayhan, General Secretary of Luton Council of Mosques

Our young people already say it without hesitation: the violence we've seen is racism. They watched grown adults gather outside mosques and hotels. They heard what was chanted and saw who it was aimed at, and they knew exactly what it was. Children aren't confused about this.

We're asking schools not to take that clarity away. When a young person tells you what they saw and calls it racism, the wrong response is to talk them into doubt — to say it was more complicated than that, or to ask them to weigh up every side. They've already done the hard part. What they need is for the adults around them to say plainly: yes, you're right, and it was wrong.

Children can see the logic running underneath these events — that some people belong here and others can be driven out. When schools won't name that logic, children learn that the institutions meant to protect them will look the other way. When schools do name it, the lesson is a better one and it lasts longer. They learn they are valued and believed. They learn their judgement can be trusted, and that there are adults willing to stand with them.

Father Luke Larner, Priest-in-Charge at St Andrew's Church in Luton

The levels of racism and intolerance experienced by people belonging to minoritised communities is a concern and responsibility for all of us. There can be no doubt—we have seen a major increase in public displays of racism, Islamophobia and intolerance on our streets in recent years. These events should be a call to urgent action in our communities and our nation, particularly for those with a responsibility for educating and caring for our children and young people.

Particularly heartbreaking for me as a priest is to see some of those promoting this hatred adopt the symbols of the Christian faith. This has sometimes been framed around narratives of so-called Christian Nationalism and the framing of so-called 'British identity' in exclusionary terms. The Christian faith explicitly forbids prejudice against people based on gender, ethnicity, creed or social class - 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). Christian teaching also forbids the mistreatment of people who arrive from other countries - 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien' (Ex. 22:21a).

It is incumbent upon both educators and religious leaders—particularly those with inherited privilege—to condemn the overt displays of racism and intolerance we are seeing, but also the abiding structural inequalities experienced by minoritised people in our communities. This is a responsibility for us all, upon which the peace and wellbeing of our communities depends.

4. Recommendations

These recommendations rest on the school's existing duties of care and equality. As explained, they do not depend on accepting any particular account of why the violence happened. Each point sets out a priority identified by community partners and by research, followed by practical responses.

1. Support the children who were frightened or harmed. For many racially minoritised children this will have been frightening, and for some traumatic, including those who were not directly involved but witnessed events locally or online.

Recommended school response:

i. Make early, sensitive contact with affected families to understand how they have been affected. Many will not raise it without being invited to. This can be done through usual pastoral interventions, such as coffee mornings for parents and carers, and PSHE or tutor time for young people.

ii. Acknowledge what has happened openly and in age-appropriate terms, rather than passing over it in silence.

iii. Build in regular time for pupils to talk about how they are feeling, letting children lead on what they wish to discuss.

iv. Be clear about the pastoral and mental health support available, and repeat this so families know where to turn.

v. Put supervision in place for staff supporting distressed children, including staff who are themselves affected.

2. Communication and reassurance are priorities. Silence is not neutral; to a child who was targeted, it can read as the school taking sides against them.

Recommended school response:

i. Address what has happened directly in communications to pupils, parents and carers, and make clear that the school stands against racism.

ii. Where families are wary of statutory services, including the police, go beyond signposting where possible and offer active, trusted support to access help. Consider whether there is support available through community groups who might be willing to

work with schools.

iii. Correct misinformation calmly and factually, recognising that many children first encountered events through social media.

3. Listen, and keep listening. Work should be done **with** communities, not done **to** them.

Recommended school response:

i. Create safe, facilitated spaces for affected pupils to talk, led by a member of staff equipped to do so. Do not ask racially minoritised children to educate their peers or relive events for a lesson.

ii. Create a similar space for staff who have been affected.

iii. Identify a senior leader and a governor to provide oversight and accountability.

4. Address the structural roots, including in your own school. This violence has historic roots and is sustained by structural conditions (see Burnett, 2026; for the longer historical context see Hall et al., 1978; Gilroy, 2004). Schools are part of this wider picture rather than separate from it, and one-off responses are not enough.

Recommended school response:

i. Review the curriculum so that children from minoritised backgrounds are able to see themselves in it, and so the histories of empire and migration are taught honestly, including why Britain is a multi-ethnic society in the first place. As the writer A. Sivanandan (1990) observed:

"we are here because you were there."

Children who understand that history are better equipped to critically evaluate accounts that cast their neighbours as recent intruders.

ii. Invest in staff racial literacy through sustained professional development, rather than occasional one-off sessions.

iii. Review policies that appear neutral but may disadvantage particular groups in practice. Uniform and hair policies are common examples.

iv. Look honestly at the school's own record. Ask whether exclusions, sanctions, the curriculum, recruitment and the experiences pupils report suggest that racism operates within the school as well as beyond its gates, and act on what that review finds.

These changes reflect the broader evidence on prejudice reduction, which suggests that sustained institutional approaches are more likely to produce lasting change than isolated classroom activities (Paluck et al., 2021).

5. Support affected staff, and share the load. Staff are affected too, and the work falls unevenly.

Recommended school response:

i. Take the wellbeing of racially minoritised staff seriously, recognising they may have been targeted or distressed by the same events.

ii. Share the work of anti-racism across the whole school, rather than leaving it to a small number of colleagues of colour.

6. Help pupils navigate disinformation and symbols. Some pupils are exposed to far-right narratives and disinformation online, and a few may be drawn towards them.

Recommended school response:

i. Build pupils' ability to question and check what they see online.

ii. Respond to pupils who express hostile views through relationship and education, keeping them engaged rather than pushing them away.

iii. Be alert to the risk that heavy-handed or securitised responses can themselves racialise Muslim children. Where genuine safeguarding concerns arise, follow your normal safeguarding procedures, and respond proportionately rather than reaching first for surveillance or referral. There is good evidence that safeguarding and counter-terrorism responses applied disproportionately to racially minoritised pupils can themselves treat a child as risky, threatening or suspect, and so reproduce the racism the school is trying to address (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023).

iv. Help pupils make sense of the religious and national symbolism they may encounter, including crusader and Templar imagery, wooden crosses, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer at protests, and 'raise the flag' campaigns using the St George's cross. Teach them to read the context and intent behind an event, looking at who has gathered and what is being said, rather than reacting to the symbol on its own. Be clear that displaying these symbols does not make a protest an authentic expression of the Christian faith, whatever those involved may claim, and the school can say plainly that it does not accept this as speaking for Christianity. This helps children avoid coming to see ordinary flags, churches or religious symbols as a source of threat. Take particular care with younger children, who think in more concrete terms and may move quickly from understanding that particular people meant harm to believing that the symbols themselves are dangerous.

5. Raising awareness and developing understanding

Things you may not know already:

- A child does not have to be a direct target to be harmed. Seeing racist violence locally or online, or sensing a parent's fear, is associated with poorer wellbeing and mental health in children.
- Racial trauma can resemble other forms of trauma. Distress may surface gradually and may not look like an obvious reaction to a single event. Like other forms of chronic adversity, racism can contribute to toxic stress when children lack consistent protective relationships and supportive environments (Shonkoff et al., 2021).
- For a child who already experiences everyday racism, events such as these can confirm a sense that the world is unsafe for people like them. It is rarely felt as a one-off.
- Children often meet these events on social media before any adult could help them interpret them, alongside the false claims used to justify the violence.
- Religious and national symbols are now being used to mark who belongs. Some far-right and anti-migrant protests have made more open use of religion, with crusader imagery, crosses and public prayer presenting Christianity as a test of who is truly English. Children meet these symbols on their own streets as well as online, and minoritised children may reasonably read them as directed at them.
- Children whose identity is not directly targeted are affected too, in different ways. These events offer simple and damaging messages about who belongs. Christian-nationalist framing actively invites white and Christian children into a story about who counts as truly English; coding their identity or symbols as inherently racist can deepen that pull rather than counter it. It is useful to reclaim those symbols as belonging to everyone.
- Race, faith and migration status overlap. The 2024 violence was specifically Islamophobic and anti-migrant, and Muslim and migrant-background children may feel particularly exposed.
- Some families are wary of statutory services because of previous experiences, including the hostile environment and immigration enforcement. Reluctance to engage is not the same as not needing help.

Things you already know, but are really important

- **Racism can affect children's wellbeing** in ways that are not always immediately visible. Like other forms of chronic adversity, repeated or ongoing experiences of racism can contribute to toxic stress when children lack consistent protective relationships and supportive environments (Shonkoff et al., 2021). Distress may emerge gradually and affect emotional wellbeing, learning and behaviour over time.

- **Trusted relationships protect children.** Strong relationships with families, trusted adults, peers and communities, alongside a strong sense of school belonging and affirmation of children's identities, help buffer the effects of racism and promote wellbeing (Priest et al., 2013; UK Trauma Council, 2022).

- **Silence sends a message.** Schools should communicate clearly and consistently so that children understand they are recognised, protected and supported.

- **Safety and belonging come before discussion.** A child who does not feel safe cannot easily reflect or learn.

- **Curriculum matters.** Children who see themselves in what they learn, and who understand Britain's real history and why it became a diverse society, are more resilient to the narratives the far right offers.

- **Staff carry this too.** Colleagues, particularly those from affected communities, need support and should not carry the work alone.

> "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."
>
> (Baldwin, 1962)

6. Recommended actions for schools

Safeguarding and well-being

Keep doing this	Try this
1. Monitor attendance and engagement, and follow up promptly on any changes. 2. Maintain a clear pastoral and mental health offer for pupils and families.	1. Make early contact with the families most likely to be affected, rather than waiting for them to come forward. 2. Build regular wellbeing and reflection time into the timetable, as distress may emerge over time. 3. Put supervision in place for staff supporting affected pupils.

Communication

Keep doing this	Try this
1. Communicate clearly and regularly with parents and carers. 2. Provide accessible information for families who use languages other than English.	1. Name what has happened and state the school's stance against racism, rather than avoiding the subject. 2. Go beyond signposting where families are wary of services, offering active and trusted support. 3. Correct misinformation factually and calmly.

Pupil and community voice

Keep doing this	Try this
1. Provide channels through which pupils can raise concerns. 2. Maintain relationships with parents and carers across the community. 3. Avoid placing the burden of educating others onto children who were targeted.	1. Create facilitated spaces for affected pupils and staff, sensitively led. 2. Invite local community and faith partners into the conversation.

Curriculum and racial literacy

Keep doing this	Try this
1. Teach about diversity, equality and shared values. 2. Use trusted, independently produced resources on racism and Islamophobia.	1. Review the curriculum so children see themselves in it and learn honest histories of empire and migration. 2. Invest in staff racial literacy through sustained professional development. 3. Review apparently neutral policies for unintended racialised effects. 4. Equip staff to discuss national and religious symbols with confidence, neither ignoring how they are being used to intimidate nor treating ordinary displays of faith or national identity as suspect.

Staff support

Keep doing this	Try this
1. Attend to staff wellbeing as a matter of course.	1. Recognise that racially minoritised staff may have been directly affected by these events. 2. Distribute anti-racism work across the school rather than relying on a few colleagues. 3. Make supervision and a confidential point of contact available.

7. Resources and further reading

Practical resources for schools

National Education Union, Anti-Racism Charter.
Runnymede Trust, Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020).
UK Trauma Council, Racism, Mental Health and Trauma.
The Black Curriculum, resources and training on Black British history.
Our Migration Story (Runnymede Trust with the Historical Association and partner historians), on the history of migration to Britain.
Runnymede Trust, briefings and resources on Islamophobia and race equality.
Anti-Bullying Alliance, resources on racist and faith-targeted bullying.
Show Racism the Red Card, classroom resources.
Kids of Colour, youth-led work on race and racism.
Department for Education, Education Hub guidance on speaking to children about violent disorder.

References

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UK Trauma Council (2022). Racism, Mental Health and Trauma: Research Round-Up (Special Edition, March 2022). Edited by E. McCrory and H. Minnis. London: Anna Freud Centre.

8. Useful Local Contacts

The contacts below are a starting point for schools in Luton and Bedford. Many families are more willing to approach a trusted community or faith contact than a statutory service, so these are offered alongside, not instead of, the school's own designated safeguarding lead and the usual statutory services. Schools should add their own local details and review them regularly, as people and contact details change.

Luton

Luton Council of Mosques
www.lutonmosques.org

Luton Council of Faiths
www.lutonfaiths.org

Luton SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, through Luton Borough Council)
www.luton.gov.uk/schools-education/schools-colleges/support-information-schools/standing-advisory-council-religious-education-sacre

FACES Luton
www.faces.org.uk

Bedford

Bedford Council of Faiths
www.bcof.co.uk

Islam Bedford
linktr.ee/islambedford

Bedford Borough SACRE
bedford.gov.uk/schools-education-and-childcare/schools-and-colleges/bedford-borough-sacre/bedford-borough-sacre-overview

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