

Returning to Pre-K and Elementary Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Best Practice Recommendations to Support Children's Social-Emotional Development & Mental Health

Children 3-11 years old have unique social-emotional needs and the heightened stress of the pandemic has potential to directly impact their mental health. The adults supporting children in the education system have potential to significantly benefit children's social-emotional development and reduce the stress of COVID-19.

Expect big (different) behaviors

Returning to school may create great joy in some children while creating distress and anxiety in others. Help children develop emotional literacy, the understanding of big feelings, how they change, and how we may have multiple feelings about the same thing. Discuss and model healthy ways to cope with feelings through calming activities, breathing, movement, and hopeful thinking. Be aware of changes in students' behavior or personality and offer opportunities for connection and support.

Partner with parents to prepare their children

Partnerships between schools and families are even more essential than usual. This is not a typical transition, and parents' worries and concerns are valid. Elevate parent and family voice, as they are experts on their child's individual strengths, needs, and resources during these challenging times. Encourage parents and families to have regular conversations with their children about what to expect when they return to school, their thoughts and feelings about how things may be different, and ways to proactively cope with these changes.

Be gentle with yourself

Self-care is the greatest gift you can give to yourself and your students.



Children are not made to social distance

Keep realistic expectations with regard to masks and social distancing requirements. Be prepared with visual and verbal reminders throughout your time together.



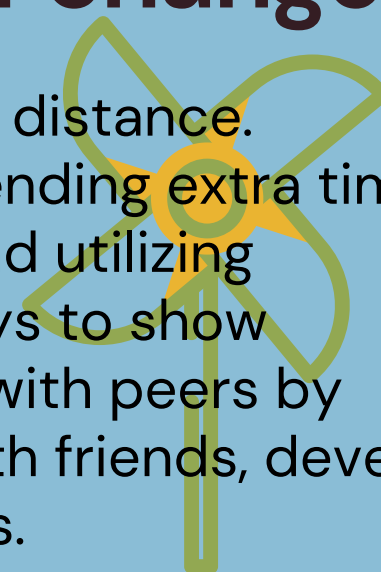
You mean more than you know

Many students miss their routine, their friends, and their teachers. You set the tone and pace of the learning in your classroom.



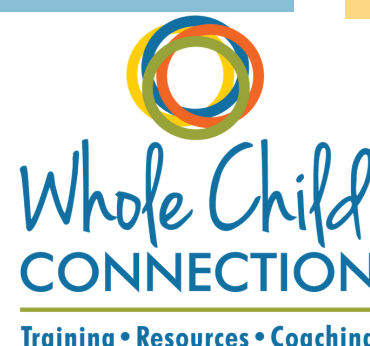
Relationships are important agents of change

Children thrive on social connection, even during times of social distance. Intentionally connect with your students during this time by spending extra time learning about their interests and temperaments; by creating and utilizing relational routines before lessons; and intentionally planning ways to show warmth from distance. Don't forget to also foster social bonds with peers by offering concrete opportunities for young people to connect with friends, develop new relationships, and engage in play (yes, play!) on a daily basis.



Utilize your resources

You are not alone. Connect with other educators in your area. Develop a list of trusted and reliable resources related to stress, wellness, trauma, resilience, and mental health. This list can be distributed to families as well as to educators and school staff.



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Expect big (different) behaviors

Often young children have not yet developed their full ability to self-regulate or recognize and/or express big emotions in the elementary years. Elementary-aged children often use behavior to demonstrate how they are feeling and may be distracted and have difficulty focusing, act out or misbehave more frequently, or withdraw from academic or social activities. Be patient, and help students develop emotional literacy through intentional teaching. Children's literature is an excellent way to help children recognize how they are feeling, how others are feeling, that feelings change, and that we can have different feelings about the same thing. Remind children (and yourself!) that all feelings are good feelings – and we can use strategies to calm big feelings. You can help children develop these important emotional regulation skills by teaching and modeling varied calming strategies like deep breathing, mindful coloring or drawing, listening to calming music, asking for help, taking breaks, and thinking positive thoughts. Children also thrive on **routines** – keep these as consistent as possible, and provide visual cues paired with expectations to ensure a predictable schedule. Remember that you and the students are experiencing a big change in day to day life, and more support is needed to effectively manage it together.

Partner with parents to prepare their children

After months of adapting to a new routine at home, more change is on the horizon with the transition back to school. Whether children are learning at home, under a hybrid-model, or back-to-school full-time, parents remain essential partners in ensuring students' health and wellness. Open and consistent communication is key: Reach out to families to determine the best ways and times to communicate, discuss what kinds of resources and supports are most needed to ensure their children's success, and develop workarounds that might accommodate work schedules or home situations. Be prepared to share observations you have of their child as he or she navigates this new normal, and identify school and community supports for parents should the need arise. Celebrating children's success and growth is also a key competent to promoting positive parent-teacher relationships – and consistent praise does wonders of good! Communicate with parents twice as often for the 'good' as you do the 'bad'. Educators can also provide ideas about how parents can best support their children during this transition. Share ideas that encourage a consistent routine at home, including predictable schedules for sleeping, eating, schoolwork, and play. Consider sharing information about how kids commonly respond to stress, strategies for coping with new things like masks and social distance, and messages promoting resilience and hope ("We can get through this"). Encourage parents to review and highlight the good things about their children's day and reinforce hopeful and empowering messages about their community and future. While many things are still undecided, providing parents with ways to navigate these conversations of uncertainty will foster their children's resiliency.

Be gentle with yourself

Remember, you are also working through a pandemic - and are likely to experience personal and professional stress as well as secondary trauma responses. Our feelings and behaviors related to the pandemic are natural responses to the global trauma and loss going on around us. Focus on what's in your control; acknowledge and accept your thoughts and feelings; and identify resources (colleagues, friends/family, exercise, or mindful moments) to help you cope.

Be aware that secondary trauma may also arise when you are teaching those who have experienced hardship, suffering, and crisis - which we know kids and teens have experienced disproportionately during the past several months. The following are potential warning signs of secondary trauma exposure response in adults: Feeling overly hopeless or helpless, angry, fearful, or guilty; having difficulty empathizing; feeling a sense of chronic exhaustion or like you can never do enough; experiencing a sense of persecution, hyper vigilance or dissociation; having an inflated sense of importance related to your work; or avoiding or over-engaging with your work. If you notice these feelings, please be gentle with yourself, activate your self-care plan, and consider reaching out for professional support.



Returning to Pre-K and Elementary Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Best Practice Recommendations to Support Children's Social-Emotional Development & Mental Health

Children are not made to social distance

Our new world is full of new challenges presented through the social distancing, masks, guards, and new safety precautions. Social distancing guidelines are recommended for the health and safety of all of us. Children will re-enter school with varying experiences with face masks and social distance, mixed feelings about new requirements, and varied abilities to tolerate and follow-through with these requirements throughout the school day. Some may find them frustrating or overwhelming – a visual and tactile reminder of how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting our life at school and in our communities. Children will also have difficulty reading teachers' and peers' facial expressions, which can be particularly unsettling for children who rely upon nonverbal cues throughout their day.

With proper guidance and practice, most children can be taught to use face masks and maintain social distance. Encourage families to start teaching mask usage at home for short periods of time, while doing fun activities. Once they arrive at school, teachers can support elementary-aged children by modeling, normalizing, and even celebrating masks. Talk with students about how you picked (or made!) your mask, ask about how they chose theirs, and consider making play masks for decorating or pretend with stuffed animals or dolls. Teach lessons about why these new guidelines are important, and talk about how their sacrifices are playing a part in protecting their grandparents, teachers, friends, and school community. Regularly teach about using masks safely (e.g., how to put on and take off carefully), and provide clear and specific praise or reinforcement for safe masking and distancing (“You’re doing a great job keeping your mask in place while in line!”).

Expect kids to slip up, and continuously support with visual cues and visual reminders. Be understanding when two peers spontaneously hug because they missed each other or struggle with itchy or hot masks. Respond by teaching kids to use coping strategies – for example, by taking a mask break in a designated area when needed, or by drawing a picture for a friend. Let your students know what you’re doing to cope with these new rules and regulations and validate their feelings of frustration. However, also be clear about what you can and can’t compromise on and set enforceable limits when needed.

You mean more than you know

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all of us socially and emotionally. However, we also know that children are resilient and with the right support, they will make it through this. As adults, it is our job to foster a sense of safety and security; promote social connections; model calm and comfort; and set a tone of empowerment and hope. Attend to these needs before instruction, as they are the foundation for both socioemotional development and learning. Be mindful of how quickly your content is paced, as children may need more time to process new information during times of crisis.

Build a sense of safety through consistent routines and structures for in-person or virtual classwork, recording assignments, and turning in work. Start off the day with relational routines like morning meeting that build a sense of hope, empowerment, and connection. Encourage children to share hopeful thoughts (e.g. “Three things I’m looking forward to today” or “something I did well yesterday”) and share some of your own empowering reflections. Build on this throughout the day by regularly acknowledging students’ accomplishments and creating opportunities for appreciation and specific praise. This can become a daily virtual practice in the classroom where youth also acknowledge their peers, teachers, or self.

Be aware that some children may display increased levels of fatigue and exhaustion; in such cases, stimulating and creative activities can help peak engagement and learning. For youth who display increased agitation and anxiety, incorporate mindful moments and bubble-breathing breaks throughout the day. And finally – remind everyone that this is temporary and they are not alone.

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Warm and trusting relationships with adults are the foundation for learning and motivation during the elementary school years and are critical for supporting resilience to adversity. Teachers who share warm and sensitive relationships with their elementary-aged students report that these kids are less anxious about school, are more confident and self-directed, and are more cooperative and engaged in learning. Focus on fostering these relationships by creating and utilizing relational routines before beginning lessons or checking in on distance learning assignments (e.g., highs and lows of the week; identifying three good things about today). A socially distant teacher can also host socially distant or virtual lunch groups, celebrate kids' interests and experiences, and offer frequent and specific praise that focuses children's efforts ("You are working so hard to answer that question." and "I like how you cleaned up so thoroughly after yourself.") Finally, don't forget to hold daily morning meetings even if it takes away from content time – connecting right now is key.

Friendships are also important for learning and development in elementary school, and children thrive on social interactions with their peers. Many have expressed missing their friends, so don't be surprised if those extroverted students want to engage with their friends all day. At the same time, be sensitive to your introverted students who may have a more difficult time re-engaging their peers. Meet kids where they are by intentionally scheduling in time for social interaction with old and new friends. Teachers can support this in a socially distant classroom by infusing relationship skills into content through virtual or physically distant games, scavenger hunts, music, or role playing skits; getting-to-know-you icebreakers and relational routines (e.g., two truths and a lie; share three good things about your day); and technology-assisted group artwork and projects. Writing opportunities, discussion circles, or daily check-in are also structured, yet safe ways kids can unpack the world around them. Social skills are skills that develop with practice over time, so don't hesitate to plan and teach these skills on a daily basis.

Utilize your resources

You are not alone! There is a whole community holding you in mind and hoping to share how much we care about the unique experience you are having right now.

Work as a school team to develop a list of trusted and reliable resources related to stress, wellness, trauma, resilience, and mental health. This list should include a mental health emergency hotline, disaster distress hotline, domestic violence hotline, school mental health staff available by phone or video, and community mental health resources. This list can be distributed to families as well as to educators and school staff.

There are so many resources being provided, it can be really overwhelming. Sometimes it's helpful to talk things through with someone else instead of sifting through all the new tools in your inbox. Children's Institute offers a [series of supports](#) to expand your toolbox, access resources and connect with other educators. Likewise, the University of Rochester Medical Center has a set of [resources for families](#) who are interested in learning more about ways to support their children with mental health needs.

Pediatricians and local mental health professionals can also help children or caregivers to cope with COVID-19 related stress, often from the comfort of families' own homes via telehealth platforms. Kids Thrive 585 offers [Parenting Help](#) and links to other community resources. [United Way/211](#) can provide school teams with personalized support in navigating these many resources.