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# Children's Mental Health Promotion and Support: Strategies for Educators

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Students' social and emotional welfare is important for academic success. Schools are responsible for teaching academics and also for promoting the mental health of students. School mental health services promote the psychological health of all students, providing protective support to students at risk and supporting educational environments that allow students to cope with challenges and problems.

Mental health is not only the absence of psychological or behavior problems, but the presence of wellness or psychological health. For example, self-esteem, self-acceptance, resiliency, and effective coping skills contribute to mental health and good behavior in students. While families provide the primary support for developing children's mental health, schools play an important role working with students and families.

## **CREATE A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

In order to promote children's mental health, it is necessary for teachers and other educators to implement a variety of strategies in schools.

### **School-Wide Activities**

School-wide activities build a sense of community, providing students and staff opportunities to learn about each other. Some ideas include:

- Multiple-grade recess
- Cross-grade lunchtime buddies
- Cross-grade book clubs
- Cross-age tutoring

### **Physical Environment**

The physical environment should promote a sense of learning. For example:

- Collaboratively create and post school-wide expectations and consequences.
- Display student work throughout the school.
- Keep the school building clean and welcoming.

### **Student Engagement**

Creating classroom environments that increase student engagement is critical. Students are more likely to be motivated when they perceive tasks to be:

- Challenging
- Matched to their ability
- Enhancing their self-efficacy
- Relevant to their lives and experience
- Under their control

Having input in determining rules, schedules, and course content facilitates this perception of control. These factors cultivate feelings of belonging and are associated with a more positive school climate, better academic achievement, and increased student and teacher mental health.

### **Relationship Development**

Factors contributing to a healthy context for learning include:

- Positive teacher–student relationships
- Supportive peer relationships
- Positive home–school communication

The Responsive Classroom approach promotes school connectedness through relationship development and the discussion of shared concerns. The program has several components:

- Daily meetings geared to promote self-awareness, self-management, and social relationship skills
- Planning school-wide activities to build a sense of community
- Welcoming families and the community as partners
- Organizing the physical environment to set a tone of learning
- Interactive modeling
- Collaborative problem solving

Research shows that students in responsive classrooms increased their reading and math scores, had better social skills, and felt more positively about school. Their teachers felt more effective and positive about teaching, offered more high-quality instruction, and collaborated more with fellow teachers (Rimm-Kaufman, 2006).

### **Family Involvement**

Family involvement is important in any mental health program for children. The Positive Attitudes Through Learning in Schools (PALS) program has numerous strategies for engaging and supporting families by providing:

- Opportunities to families for academic and behavioral growth
- Social support
- Parenting skill development
- Numerous opportunities for parent involvement in school
- Parent support groups
- Home visits

The PALS programs have demonstrated that flexible services coupled with intensive parent outreach and involvement are effective in promoting mental health (Atkins, Graczyk, Frazier, & Abdul-Adil, 2003).

### **Coordinated Services**

Improving the culture of a school requires reducing or eliminating service fragmentation. Educators need to coordinate the services provided to students so that lessons and skills are universally taught and reinforced. Researchers suggest creating a framework or structure to coordinate all social-emotional and character development efforts within the school. It is critical to ensure that these efforts are integrated into every aspect of the learning community. In order to coordinate services, educators must conduct initial and ongoing assessments of the school culture through the use of:

- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Opinion essays
- Suggestion boxes

### **SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH RISKS AND NEEDS**

Unfortunately, not all students will be protected by merely attending a school with a positive and engaging school climate, and many may exhibit risk-taking behaviors. Others may not exhibit risk-taking behaviors and therefore are not easily identified. It is not uncommon for students to internalize problems, resulting in stress, anxiety, or depression. They may not willingly seek help, in part due to the stigma associated with mental health problems. Stigma is a significant barrier to seeking mental health services in schools, especially in the middle and high school years. School personnel should make a concerted effort to combat the stigma by embedding mental health awareness into school-wide curriculum. Schools can further promote these positive messages and awareness of warning signs to parents and the community through newsletters, flyers, or brochures made by school personnel or students.

### **Recognize Warning Signs**

Educators should identify risk-taking behaviors as early warning signs of students in need of support. For those students who are unable or unwilling to articulate their feelings or problems, school personnel need to be aware of behaviors that may be warning signs of significant mental health problems requiring intervention. Such warning signs include:

- Acting fidgety
- Appearing flushed or tense
- Appearing withdrawn
- Disrupting peers or activities
- Challenging authority or not complying with classroom/school rules

It is essential to address and redirect these behaviors in prosocial directions. It is also important to help students develop feasible alternatives as they work through emotionally difficult situations, recognize their precursors of emotional distress, and learn self-calming strategies.

When school personnel identify students who may be in need of support, they should refer their concerns to school mental health staff. Building-level student support teams may be used to coordinate programs and assess and determine needed services.

### **System of Care**

Some students will require intensive supports for mental health needs. Students in need of the most intensive assistance may require a system of care. In a coordinated system of care, all individuals working with a student in need of intensive services must maintain open and regular lines of communication, including family members, school personnel, and any community members working with the student. Services must be tailored to the student's unique needs, taking into consideration all available resources. Further, school administrators should ensure that school-wide crisis procedures have been clearly established and are well known to all staff.

### **Classroom Strategies**

The following are suggestions for classroom teachers working with students needing intensive mental health support:

**Identify resources.** When working with at-risk students, it is essential to identify available school personnel who can provide support in times of need. Each staff member has a unique skill set and knowledge base, and is potentially a valuable resource. The following individuals are valuable resources in providing mental health support:

- School counselors
- School psychologists
- School social workers
- Administrators
- School nurse
- Teachers
- Specialists such as emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) teachers, behavior specialists, chemical dependency specialists, and family liaison workers

- Secretaries, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, or any other staff members who take an interest in the social-emotional needs of students

**Creating a supportive environment.** A child with severe behaviors or emotional vulnerability may require an environment that is particularly stable, including a consistent schedule of activity. For example, a “work, break, work, break” schedule may help to establish a consistent routine. The student may also benefit from modified classroom expectations and consequences that are clearly established and understood by the student. For example, a highly anxious student who has difficulty focusing on tasks in a large-group setting might be allowed to work in a more sheltered area or study carrel for part of the instructional period. A depressed student who is unable or unwilling to respond orally during class discussion might be allowed to record his or her contributions or discuss the lesson privately with the teacher.

**Taking a break: individual or class-wide.** If the student is in need of a break to regain his or her sense of emotional stability, there are a few options to consider:

- Discreetly ask the student to walk a note to a teacher or walk a folder to the office.
- Allow the student to visit a school staff member with whom a bond has been established.
- Designate a quiet location in the classroom that provides the student a place to regain composure.
- Ask the student to draw a picture or write a story about how he or she is feeling. Follow up to discuss the feelings associated with the story/picture.

Class-wide breaks may be necessary when the needs of an individual student threaten to disrupt the entire class. Such breaks might include:

- Holding an emergency class meeting to address needs of students
- Playing a quick game
- Introducing deep breathing or other relaxation techniques
- Playing soft classical music
- Allowing students to choose a brief relaxing activity such as drawing, writing, or reading

These breaks are not intended as reinforcers and should not relieve any students of responsibilities for completing work. If such breaks become frequently necessary, alternative strategies should be developed to prevent students from equating acting out with escaping a task.

**Remain calm and in control.** Power struggles between teacher and student may arise as a result of the student's inability to maintain emotional stability. It is important for teachers to remain outwardly composed. Certain techniques may be helpful, such as:

- Practicing simple stress reduction techniques such as deep breathing before responding to the student
- Speaking in a calm tone
- Keeping responses brief

Teachers must also be ready to assist the student to regain composure:

- Word requests positively instead of negatively.
- Model calm behavior for the student.
- Acknowledge that the student has the power to make behavioral choices, and help the student recognize his or her options.
- Offer the student a way to save face in the situation.

## CONCLUSION

Students have varying levels of need for mental health support in the school setting. Most students' needs will be adequately met in a positive and engaging school environment. However, a supportive school setting will not be sufficient to meet all students' needs. Some will overtly exhibit at-risk behaviors or be vulnerable to developing mental health problems due to the presence of risk factors in their lives. For these students, it is imperative that educators be aware of the warning signs of mental health difficulties and of the resources they can call on for consultation and support. Students with intensive mental health needs require a comprehensive system of care involving the home, school, and community. Hopefully, within this framework of a continuum of mental health services, all students will successfully navigate their school experience and beyond.

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## RESOURCES

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### Online

- Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL): <http://www.casel.org>
- Committee for Children: <http://www.cfchildren.org>
- Open Circle: <http://www.open-circle.org>
- Responsive Classroom: <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>
- Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program: <http://www.ubhcisweb.org/sdm/>
- UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

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