

Frequently Asked Questions on Going Back Mentally Safe During a Pandemic

What student needs should schools consider?

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) released a statement that outlined eight key points on precautions in re-opening schools. The main takeaway is that the same plan will not be appropriate for all schools. You must consider the needs of your school community, which include individual students, special needs populations, school staff, and how to be safe given your class size. Read the [full statement here](#).

What about staff well-being should schools consider?

It is crucial for the staff in your school community to be supported during this pandemic. This includes taking care of their own mental health and well-being. Helping staff engage in the following techniques will allow these behaviors to spread throughout your school community. Here are some examples staff and parents can do to maintain their mental health and well-being:

- Keep a regular schedule
- Set boundaries on work/class schedules
- Stay connected with friends/family
- Get fresh air and exercise
- Use reliable sources to Stay informed
- Unplug from social media
- Get creative and share with co-workers/students
- Recognize your warning signs and triggers

To access more mental resources for yourself or your colleagues, visit the [Center for Workplace Mental Health](#).

How can staff show support and empathy given social distance guidelines?

Sharing your personal experience with others about going through the pandemic together can be healing and liberating. It is also important to let them know that you care about them and want to support them. Though it has become much harder to show your emotions while wearing a mask, be creative. You can work as a group on using your eyes, eyebrows, or forehead to communicate emotions. In a classroom setting, try to come up with norms on how to show that you are happy, are sad, agree, disagree, or don't know something. You can use gestures and body language, or simply look into simple sign language to use in class. Other examples include giving air high fives, air hugging, and virtually hugging. You can also find a comfort object to present to students who may need extra help calming themselves. They can hug and snuggle the object or keep it close by. Remember to make sure that the student is safe in doing whatever makes them feel better.

How can staff or parents recognize whether the pandemic, their mental health, or another stressor is impacting the youth's life?

As staff or parents, you are well-positioned to notice changes in a youth's behavior. The relationship that you have with the youth is the starting basis, because you understand and recognize their normal behavior. Below is a framework that you can use.

Notice: Notice when a youth is moving away from their usual behavior, showing disruptive behaviors, or withdrawing from others.

Talk: Talk to the youth about what you have noticed to show that you care and are interested in what is happening in their life.

Act: Take action if the youth needs to be connected to appropriate support services.

We have adapted this approach to current distance learning practices for both school and home [here](#). To learn more about how our program can make an impact on the school communities, check out our [2020 Notice. Talk. Act.™](#) at School Briefing Report

How can schools ensure interactive and engaging activities during virtual learning?

Social interaction and educational objectives are not mutually exclusive, they often go hand-in hand. Especially in the United States, peer influence is crucial to cognitive development throughout an individual's educational journey. Learning from one another on how to interact with others, what is acceptable in a group, and how to recognize social cues are all developed through interactions with others. It is important for schools to think about how to develop these skill sets strategically, while providing guidance and modeling behaviors for virtual interaction.

For example, a small group of students can demonstrate for the entire class how they can talk to one another over a virtual learning environment. As a teacher, you just need to make sure things are running smoothly. There are also simple ways to connect with younger children, such as putting your fingers up to the camera for a "mini-five." Get creative and share your ideas with others.

What can staff do to make the "new normal" and the transition to different habits, seamless for students?

It is important to acknowledge that change is hard for everyone, especially when habits and routines are involved. Talking to someone you trust or someone who is trained to provide advice can be helpful. It is also helpful to face the challenge with a positive but honest approach. In your class, you can make an agreement that when things are difficult, everyone will face them together and help each other. You will let each other know when you need help or are having a bad day. Make sure to check-in with your students regularly. Below are examples of check-in questions:

- How are you really doing?
- What might be bothering you about the new normal?
- What might be better about the new normal?

Engaging students in a conversation about change and how it is impacting them allows them to process together and with you in a healthy way.

How can you support a child who lost a family member due to this pandemic?

When it comes to grieving, staff may want to start a conversation with the student who lost a family member to let the students express what happened and how they are feeling. Some children may need to have individual therapy to help them understand what happened. On the other hand, others might benefit from a support group about grieving where they can share their experiences in a more private setting. The support group should have children of the same age. In addition, make sure that staff and families are supported in their grief over loss of loved ones during this pandemic. If the school community has been heavily impacted by the pandemic, schools may want to consider trauma-informed training or therapy. It is critical to understand how the pandemic has impacted your community and respond accordingly.

How can we better monitor cyberbullying and its impacts on children, especially with more screen time and interaction over screens?

Even before the pandemic, young people had been spending more time on electric devices. As a result, cyberbullying has become a major concern. This requires adults to be more vigilant in monitoring student social media accounts. Balancing media consumption and applying parental controls are crucial. This may include being aware of emails and passwords that a youth might use; it is important to monitor usage while promoting independence. Check in regularly with youth on what they are seeing, hearing, or posting on social media. Let it become normal to talk about. Keep in mind that forcing the issue or coming in with authority will most likely close them off further. In addition, keep yourself up to date with the most recent social media applications. Connect with one another and learn what they might know about the app. The [KnowBullying Mobile App](#) is also a great application to learn more about bully and how parents, staff, and young people can prevent bullying.



How can schools get creative in their outreach to students that may disengage during this distance learning period?

We encourage you to check out our [resources around distance learning](#) for both the school and home. Checking in via with parents and students is highly encouraged to get a sense of how both the student and family are doing during this difficult time. If access to the Internet is a concern for your community, you can always check in by phone call or a letter with a phone number to call, in case they need additional support services. For schools that are providing food assistances during this distance learning period, you can try to have additional resource information available to share with families, including packing the food donation bag with other types of support your school or community might be offering. If your school and each student's family allow, you can try to drop by the last known location or address of the student to drop off a care package or just to drive by to say hello.

What are some techniques for parents or caregivers to use to ensure students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) continue to receive support?

Learning remotely is challenging to the mental health and overall development of most IEP students. As schools are federally required to provide what is stated in the students' plan goals, schools should be looking to rework these plans because they cannot provide all services, given the circumstances. We encourage parents or caregivers of IEP students to make sure the support they typically receive is still offered or a suitable alternative is provided. We do not want parents or caregivers to feel that they must lose support or services.

What are some resources for ideas on activities or games to increase engagement with students during virtual learning?

One game that is easy to accomplish over virtual learning and in-person social distancing is Charades. You can even make it related to the current topic that you might be learning. You can move into breakout groups to allow students to come up with skits to present to the classroom through Zoom or other online classroom platforms to encourage small group engagement. You can host a virtual talent show at the end of each week and feature a few students to showcase their talents. Especially in elementary and middle school, we want to encourage physical movement. Whether it is dance, stretching, or yoga, it can be great to bring into the classroom as a break. Simple games like hangman or tic-tac-toe over the virtual screen can also work in this environment. We encourage you to explore the platform that you have for different plug-ins that are helpful to make your sessions more interactive.

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