



# Strategies to Support a Positive School Climate

## Emotional Health

Mental health reflects the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of well-being and impacts both our cognitions and behaviours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Mental health affects a person's overall well-being and poor mental health is a risk factor for chronic physical conditions. The most common mental health problems among school-age children are anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders.



### Why is it important?

- Anxiety and academic achievement are related as anxiety becomes more severe students' ability to perform declines (Owens et al., 2012).
- Depressive symptoms are linked to an increased risk of poor social relationships, substance abuse and poor educational attainment (Fletcher, 2010).
- Conduct disorders are predictive of school dropout (Tramontina et al., 2001). (Mossakowski, 2003).

## In Practice

Interventions to improve mental health typically involve a combination of whole-school approaches and selective interventions aimed at students identified as at risk of developing a mental health problem.

### 1. Whole-School Interventions



#### What can schools do?

Schools can take proactive steps to support student mental health by doing the following:

- Assign and train a committed mental health lead to manage the implementation of strategies designed to promote positive mental health and well-being, while also monitoring the impact of those whole-school interventions (O'Reilly et al., 2018).
- Promote a culture of acceptance and destigmatize mental health problems by organizing schoolwide assemblies and events aimed at mental health awareness.
- Provide sufficient training and support so that both students and school staff are well positioned to recognize warning signs to help students access mental health services.
- Find opportunities to bolster school connectedness in order to promote student health and prevent mental illness.

Schools should also adopt protocols to triage support for students who are deemed at risk of experiencing mental health problems (e.g., build partnerships with mental health professionals for behavioural and cognitive-behavioural programs).



#### In the Classroom

Teachers can help identify students most at risk of developing mental health problems.

Warning signs include:

- Sustained negative mood, fatigue, or other signs of emotional distress
- Abrupt decline in performance at school and withdrawal from previously favored activities
- Expressing signs of excessive worry or being overwhelmed for seemingly no reason
- Difficulty concentrating in class resulting in acting out against peers or school staff
- Sudden changes in behavior patterns, such as severe mood swings and emotional outbursts
- Engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as substance abuse

Teachers should investigate when these behaviours are intense, prolonged and result in disruptions to the student's life.

## 2. Build Students' Social and Emotional Skills

General interventions to improve mental health typically involve building students' social and emotional skills. Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves a set of competencies including the ability to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, and establish and maintain positive relationships (Zins & Elias, 2007). These competencies can be taught and learnt from an early age.



### What can schools do?

Building students' social and emotional skills is not simply a matter of adopting a particular program; rather, it should be an integral part of school-wide planning and processes.

- Invest in training so that educators know how to effectively teach social and emotional skills and embed SEL in the curriculum.
- Encourage PLCs to share strategies and brainstorm classroom management techniques to better support students' social and emotional needs.
- Consider training school counselors to become SEL advisors capable of mentoring both teachers and students alike in understanding and applying SEL skills.
- Assess and track a small set of student's social and emotional skills to inform improvement efforts and make stronger connections with students.



### In the Classroom

Educators can provide extra support and training of SEL skills for students who struggle by:

- Implementing structured daily routines designed to create classroom environments characterized by predictability (e.g., consistent rules, rituals and expectations).
- Giving students the freedom to express themselves through creative writing assignments, video and photography projects, and other opportunities that allow for self-expression through verbal and non-verbal means.
- Helping students to reevaluate problem behaviours by modeling appropriate responses and implementing incentive-based approaches for compliance (e.g., meaningful reward systems).

## References

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