

Mental Health in the Classroom

Tips for Teachers

Children may not always have the words to describe how they are feeling. These feelings may come out as behavioral concerns. While consequences are sometimes fitting, educators and school professionals should be careful not to miss the critical information the child is trying to communicate through their behaviors. By taking a deeper look, you can better help children who may be struggling with mental health concerns.

Examples of behaviors to watch for in a student:

- **Worrying excessively**
- **Seeming withdrawn, sad, or fearful**
- **Having a hard time concentrating**
- **Changes in school performance**
- **Hyperactive behavior**
- **Frequent disobedience or aggression**



A child in my classroom may be struggling with their mental health. What do I do?

Talk to your student. Find an opportunity to talk with them privately, without blame or shame. Let them know you noticed they were acting a certain way and see if they know why that might be. Be specific, ask questions about how they feel, how class is going, and what you can do to help support them. Because children do not always have the words to describe their emotions, you may want to give them examples, such as “When I am scared of something new, I have a hard time focusing on anything else. Is that hard for you, too?” or “When I start to feel like energy wants to burst out of me, I can’t sit still. Do you feel like that sometimes?” These are important conversations, as they can teach your student how to connect physical and emotional feelings to their behaviors.

Track behaviors. Keep track of what types of behaviors you are seeing in your classroom and when they are happening. There may be a notable pattern. For example, you notice a student becoming tearful and withdrawn. After tracking this, you see this happens prior to gym class and may note that gym class causes them significant anxiety and stress. Where you may have gotten frustrated or confused about the behavior, you now know gym class is a stressor for this student and can work with them to identify ways to get through it.

Bring this concern to a meeting with other educators and school professionals in the child's life. Talk with the school counselor, principal, and other teachers. Your teaching group may have similar or additional concerns. This group can brainstorm ways to help the child and wrap that support around them throughout the day. If the student has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), you may consider advocating for a goal to be added that would help support their mental health.

Use positive classroom reinforcement by rewarding what your student does well. Positive classroom reinforcement gives little energy to students not following directions, and lots of energy to students who are. Children are often used to hearing negative statements, such as “don't do that” or “stop” or “no more,” which focuses on unwanted behaviors. When you give energy to a positive behavior, it motivates students to continue doing a good job. Acknowledge when a child follows directions, uses their time wisely, or is quiet during work time. Soon, many students will be looking for acknowledgement when they do a good job.

Talk to your student's parent or caregiver about these concerns. They may be well aware of the struggles their child is experiencing and may be grateful for your suggestions and support. Let parents know you care about their child and their wellbeing, share what you have noticed in the classroom and describe your concerns, using concrete examples. Be sure to also share the child's great qualities — let parents know their child is a good friend, follows rules, helps the teacher, keeps their desk or locker tidy, etc. Give the parents or caregiver time to respond and discuss what might be going on at home or out of school. Parents may have insight on how to handle situations in the classroom and may help you see things from a different perspective.

Three steps to promote positive self-worth in your classroom.

1. NOTICE THE SMALL THINGS

Children do many amazing things throughout the day. Focus on the small stuff — notice when a child helps a friend, lets another person go first in line, or shares a smile with a peer.

2. LISTEN INTENTLY

When children choose to open up, it's our opportunity to be there for them, regardless of what else might be going on around us. If possible, give the time for the conversation. If you don't have time, ask if the conversation can wait and be sure to revisit the topic. This is a great opportunity to build a trusting relationship.

3. GIVE PRAISE

Children and teens respond well to praise for a job well done. Let parents and caregivers know that you see these little things each day by giving them examples. Examples may help parents notice daily little things too!