

# Class Conversation Starters



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**We work together with  
Ontario school districts  
to support student  
mental health**

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# Class Conversation Starters



**Returning to School:** Promoting and protecting mental health and well-being in our schools and classrooms.

While mental health and student learning have always been important in Ontario schools, there has never been a time when uniting these priorities has been more essential.

To be ready to learn, students need to feel a strong sense of safety, belonging, and well-being at school. The classroom is an excellent place to promote and protect student mental health. Teachers can use

these cards as conversation starters to develop a welcoming and caring classroom that supports learning, wellness, and equitable outcomes for all students.

Promoting and protecting mental health and well-being as we return to school is the foundation for setting conditions for students to thrive.

Together, we welcome students warmly, build their mental health self-care and social-emotional skills, reduce stigma, and encourage help-seeking.



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# Class Conversation Starters

## How to use

Teachers are welcome to use these conversation starters as they see fit to open a discussion with their students.

- \* Choose a theme most relevant to your students today
  - **Seeking Help** orange cards 1–5 pages 5–14
  - **Helping a Friend** purple cards 6–10 pages 15–24
  - **Healthy Sleep** magenta cards 11–15 pages 25–34
  - **Handling Stress** green cards 16–19 pages 35–42
  - **Ice Breakers** cyan cards 20–25 pages 43–54
- \* Pick a card and ask the question on side one
- \* Let the students lead the discussion
- \* Some prompts and suggestions are available on the back of each card for additional ideas
  - *This is not an exhaustive list and suggestions may need to be adapted to suit your school*



**If you're having a hard time  
when you are at school,  
who could you talk to?**

Card 1



# SUGGESTIONS

**If you're having a hard time when you are at school,  
who could you talk to?**

- \* Friend
- \* Teacher
- \* Guidance Teacher
- \* Chaplain
- \* Coach
- \* Principal
- \* Kids Help Phone (text CONNECT to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868)
- \* Other ideas?



**If you're having a hard time  
when you are at home,  
who could you talk to?**

Card 2

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# SUGGESTIONS

**If you're having a hard time when you are at home,  
who could you talk to?**

- \* Parent(s)/Stepparent(s)
- \* Guardian(s)/Caregiver(s)
- \* Sibling(s)
- \* Extended Family  
(e.g. grandparent, aunt, uncle)
- \* Elder or Knowledge Keeper
- \* Coach
- \* Cultural or Spiritual Leader
- \* Family Friend
- \* Neighbour
- \* Kids Help Phone (text CONNECT  
to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868)
- \* Other ideas?



**What are some apps you could use to help your mental health if you're having a hard time?**

Card 3

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## What are some apps you could use to help your mental health if you're having a hard time?

- \* **HealthyMinds, Royal Ottawa Health:** Problem solving tool, help manage emotions and cope with stress
- \* **MindShift, Anxiety Canada:** Strategies to support relaxation and manage anxiety
- \* **Be Safe, ConnexOntario:** includes personal safety plan and localized resources
- \* **mood by mindyourmind, ConnexOntario:** track your mood and sleep patterns
- \* Other ideas?



**If you want to reach out for help from a caring adult, what is the first thing you could say to someone?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

**If you want to reach out for help from a caring adult,  
what is the first thing you could say to someone?**

- \* “I was hoping I could talk to you about something?”
- \* “I have a tough situation; it’s really bugging me...Can I talk to you about it?”
- \* “I’ve been feeling \_\_\_\_\_ lately, can I get your thoughts, and maybe your help?”
- \* “I’m wondering if you can help me or maybe you know someone I can talk to?”
- \* “I need some help with something.”
- \* “Can we talk?”
- \* Other ideas?

## **TRY:**

**Student help-seeking resources by  
School Mental Health Ontario**



# What do you know about Kids Help Phone?

Card 5

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## What do you know about Kids Help Phone?

- \* A service for children and youth ages 4-21. They can help regardless of how big or small your problem is.
- \* You can call (1-800-668-6868) or text CONNECT to 686868 to talk to someone 24/7.
- \* All calls/chats are anonymous and confidential. You do not have to share your contact information.
- \* You do not need to be in crisis to reach out to Kids Help Phone – maybe you just need someone to talk to because you:
  - had a fight with a parent or guardian
  - broke up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
  - lost a pet
  - got a bad mark on a test
  - Other ideas?

**FOR MORE:**  
[Kidshelpphone.ca](https://www.kidshelpphone.ca)



**If a friend you know needs help,  
what would you say to them to  
help to validate their feelings?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

**If a friend you know needs help, what would you say to them to help to validate their feelings?**

**By validating someone's feelings you're letting them know it's okay to feel the way they do. Feelings aren't always logical but they're always valid. Ideas:**

- \* "I'm here for you..."
- \* "I'm listening...."
- \* "I care about you."
- \* "I can see how you would feel upset about that because \_\_\_\_\_ and because..."
- \* "That sounds really hard and it makes sense that you would feel \_\_\_\_\_ because..."
- \* Other ideas?

## **TRY:**

**5 Golden Rules from [BeThere.org](https://www.bethere.org) – a good guide for how to talk to a friend struggling with their mental health.**



**How can you tell that a friend needs help?**

Card 7

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## How can you tell that a friend needs help?

- \* They may start to isolate themselves from others
- \* They may show changes in mood (sad, anxious, irritable)
- \* They might start to have trouble at school with grades, attendance, finishing things
- \* They might start acting differently, saying unusual things or doing risky activities
- \* They might not be keeping up with their hygiene, sleep or nutrition
- \* They might start using substances excessively
- \* They may give away prized possessions
- \* They may tell you they are struggling or have thoughts of harming themselves
- \* Other ideas?



**If a friend told you something that made you really worried about their safety, but then asked you not to tell anyone, how could you respond?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

**We all keep some secrets: romantic interests, birthday gifts, regrets, etc., but when it comes to safety, it's important not to keep secrets. That's part of being a good friend.**

- \* You could say: "I really care about you and I need to make sure that you're safe, so I can't keep this to myself. Let's try to get some help together."
- \* You could say: "I'd rather lose you as a friend than have something bad happen to you."
- \* You could say: "This feels too big for the two of us. I'll come with you. We need extra help for this."
- \* Other ideas?



**If a friend doesn't want to talk to anyone at school or at home about something serious that's bugging them and you are worried or scared for them – what should you do?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

**If a friend doesn't want to talk to anyone at school or at home about something serious that's bugging them and you are worried or scared for them – what should you do?**

- \* Call or text Kids Help Phone or call a local distress line to talk through what your next steps could be
- \* Tell a parent/guardian or another helpful, safe adult who will guide you on how to take action. You should not carry this by yourself
- \* If you think there's an immediate safety risk, call 911
- \* Other ideas?



**If a friend told you something  
on-line that makes you  
really worried about them,  
what could you do?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## If a friend told you something on-line that makes you really worried about them, what could you do?

### If someone shares their mental health struggle with you on-line that's a sign that they trust you.

- \* Follow up with them, but consider when and where you bring it up. If possible, go somewhere they feel comfortable, or set a good time to talk online.
- \* Allow enough time to hear them out. Try something like, *"Hey, you mentioned the other night that you were really stressed... I just wanted to check in. How are you feeling today?"*
- \* Talk to a trusted adult to get additional help. It's not all on you.

- \* You can tell them to call **Kids Help Phone**
  - You can offer to call your friend and Kids Help Phone in a 3-way call. Remember to set appropriate boundaries — there is additional help available.
- \* If you think there's an immediate safety risk, call 911.
- \* Other ideas?

**TRY:** 5 Golden Rules from **BeThere.org** – a good guide for how to talk to a friend struggling with their mental health.



**How much sleep should the average teenager get per night?**

Card 11

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# SUGGESTIONS

## How much sleep should the average teenager get per night?

- \* 8 – 10 hours per night
- \* Sleeping for 8-10 hours a night helps to improve:
  - Physical health
  - Emotional well-being
  - Quality of life

### FOR MORE:

[Canadian Children Getting Enough Sleep,](#)  
[Public Health Agency of Canada](#)



**How much sleep does the average teenager get per night?**

Card 12

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# SUGGESTIONS

## How much sleep does the average teenager get per night?

- \* 6.5 – 7.5 hours
- \* Suggestion for follow up:

### Why do you think, on average, teenagers do not get enough hours of sleep each night?

- Staying up late
- Screen time before bed
- Doing homework late at night
- Texting and chatting with friends at night
- Looking through social media at night
- Watching TV, YouTube, or Netflix at night
- Not having a bedtime routine
- Other ideas?

#### FOR MORE:

[Canadian Children Getting  
Enough Sleep, Public Health  
Agency of Canada](#)



**What are some ways that  
you can help yourself  
fall asleep at night?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## What are some ways that you can help yourself fall asleep at night?

- \* Avoid screen-time at night – blue light from devices interferes with healthy sleep
- \* Keep your sleep space as dark and cool as you can
- \* Try to go to sleep at the same time every night
- \* Develop a bedtime routine (e.g., listen to music, bathe, read, etc.)
- \* Other ideas?

### FOR MORE:

[Tips to Support Better Sleep in Youth, CHEO](#)



**How is your sleep different now  
than when you were a little kid?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## How is your sleep different now than when you were a little kid?

- \* Teens tend to have irregular sleep patterns across the week which can affect their biological clocks and impact their quality of sleep. Compared to younger kids, teens typically:
  - stay up later
  - sleep in later on the weekends
- \* Biological sleep patterns shift toward later times for both sleeping and waking during adolescence — meaning it is natural to not be able to fall asleep before 11:00 pm.



**What are some of the  
consequences of not getting  
a good night's sleep?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## What are some of the consequences of not getting a good night's sleep?

- \* Limits your ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems. You may even forget important information like names, numbers, your homework or even a date with a special person in your life.
- \* Makes you more prone to pimples — lack of sleep can contribute to acne and other skin problems.
- \* May lead to difficult behaviours, such as yelling at your friends or family, or being impatient.
- \* Limits your control over feelings of hunger and fullness. This may impact your appetite and cause you to snack at night or overeat late in the day.
- \* May increase your use of caffeine and nicotine.
- \* Contributes to illness — lack of sleep can impact your immune system response.
- \* Leads to difficulty using equipment safely and to driving while drowsy.

### FOR MORE:

[Canadian Children Getting Enough Sleep,  
Public Health Agency of Canada](#)



**How does your body and mind feel when you're feeling anxious due to stress?**

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## How does your body and mind feel when you're feeling anxious due to stress?

- \* Hard to concentrate
- \* Racing heart
- \* Sweaty palms
- \* Upset stomach
- \* Headache
- \* Shortness of breath
- \* Issues sleeping
- \* Other ideas?



**What is the fastest way to  
calm your body when you're  
feeling anxious due to stress?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## What is the fastest way to calm your body when you're feeling anxious due to stress?

- \* **Deep breathing:** when we feel stressed, our hearts might race, and our breathing might change. Deep breathing exercises are a great way to calm our bodies.

### TRY:

Deep breathing exercises for youth from [jack.org/covid](https://jack.org/covid)



**If we were to ask teens  
across the country what  
stressed them out the most,  
what would they say?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

**If we were to ask teens across the country what stressed them out the most, what would they say?**

- \* School – homework, assignments due, exams
- \* Home life – siblings, expectations from parents
- \* Not knowing what will happen after high school
- \* Extracurricular activities – work, volunteering
- \* Fitting in and relationships with peers
- \* Other ideas?



**What are some healthy  
ways to cope with stress?**

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# SUGGESTIONS

## What are some healthy ways to cope with stress?

- \* Talking to someone
- \* Getting enough sleep
- \* Physical exercise
- \* Hobbies – do something you love
- \* Deep breathing
- \* Muscle relaxation
- \* Visualization
- \* Changing our thoughts with positive self-talk
- \* Giving gratitude
- \* Using a helpful app
- \* Other ideas?

**TRY:**  
[jack.org/covid](https://www.jack.org/covid)



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

Card 20

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**Would you rather:**

**have the ability to fly or the  
ability to live underwater?**

**Why?**



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

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**Would you rather:**

**it always be winter or  
always be summer?**

**Why?**



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

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**Would you rather:**

**have 3 feet or 3 hands?**

**Why?**



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

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**Would you rather:**

**only be able to whisper or  
only be able to shout?**

**Why?**



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

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**Would you rather:**

**have a cat or a dog?**

**Why?**



A few fun group conversation starters  
to keep the conversations going

**Would you rather?**

Card 25

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**Would you rather:**

**speak the same language  
as dogs or be able to climb  
trees like a squirrel?**

**Why?**

