

Mental Health Promotion at School: Classroom Considerations

Supporting Mental Wellness Amongst Students with Special Education Needs

Mental health is a positive state of wellness and flourishing that can be supported and enhanced at school. Students with special education needs benefit from many of the same strategies that support wellness in all children:

- welcoming and inclusive school environments,
- explicit instruction in skills for coping and thriving,
- developmentally appropriate ways to learn about mental health, and
- a chance to share their opinions and preferences about belonging and wellness at school.

Further, because students with special education needs can be at higher risk for developing a mental health problem, an additional focus on mental health promotion and social emotional skill development in the classroom is warranted. Approaches that consider the student’s strengths, needs, identification and/or diagnosis are likely to be of greatest assistance. This includes providing appropriate individual instructional and environmental accommodations that lead to increasing success and inclusion for students. When students feel that they are managing well at school, they feel a greater sense of esteem and well-being.

While supports in this area will need to be individualized, there are some broad considerations that can be helpful for students with special education needs. These include:

I know...	I can...
<p>It is essential to understand the strengths and needs of individual students in the classroom so that all can access the mental health resources and practices that will help them to flourish.</p> <p>(Students with special education needs will have their strengths and needs listed in their Individual Education Plans.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Consider each student’s strengths and needs in relation to planned lessons and activities designed to support wellness (e.g., ability to communicate feelings and needs, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, motor dexterity, etc.). ✓ Offer ways that every student can actively participate and have a sense of belonging and inclusion in the lessons and resources, using differentiated instruction, universal design, accommodations and/or modifications as needed (see below). ✓ Consider the skills each student may need to learn and practice to better identify and manage emotions, cope with stress, stay positive and persevere when things are difficult, build and keep healthy relationships, understand and celebrate their identity, and engage in critical and creative thinking. ✓ Build in opportunities for extra practice and support in areas of identified need.



<p>Students with special education needs may need accommodations and/or modifications to mental health materials, lessons, and practices for them to access the learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use appropriate materials for each student’s developmental stage, identified learning needs, etc. ✓ Pre-teach concepts and vocabulary. ✓ Modify or adapt resources for students who may require accommodations for written materials, visual materials, auditory materials, sensory sensitivities, and/or physical activities. ✓ Consider the use of first-then boards, visual timers, visual organizers, social stories, providing body breaks, and other accommodations as required by individual students. ✓ Use assistive technology or visuals to support students with reading and language challenges. ✓ Provide students time to think and formulate their responses. ✓ Adapt your lesson for students who may struggle more with abstract concepts such as facial expressions, emotion vocabulary, and nonverbal behaviours. ✓ Provide a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their learning (e.g., drawing a picture, presenting verbally, writing in a journal, telling a story, role playing etc.). ✓ Ask for further support to adapt and modify materials by consulting with our special education team (which may include itinerant teachers, special education teachers, psychologists, speech and language pathologists, and student support staff).
<p>Students with special education needs may have increased sensitivities and a heightened response to stressors at home, school, and in the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Deliver the instruction at a calm time of day and postpone if students are having difficulty settling. ✓ Provide adequate transition time from prior activities and offer advance notice about the activities. ✓ Adapt the environment wherever possible, rather than solely focusing on the need for a student to ‘learn skills to adapt’. ✓ Identify and reduce the triggers to stress where possible. ✓ Allow time for sensory breaks and special interests.
<p>Students will benefit from being explicitly taught social emotional and mental health skills.</p> <p>(Students with special education needs may have program pages and learning expectations related to social skills, self-regulation skills, and communication skills that may be relevant for educators when considering teaching social emotional and mental health skills.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Help students with special education needs to better meet their goals by walking through the resources in more detail, offering extra practice with skills that may be more challenging for them (e.g., persevering with schoolwork, making and keeping friends, asking for help when they are feeling overwhelmed). ✓ Explicitly teach, model, and reinforce skills that rely on abstract understanding such as reading nonverbal cues, facial expressions, and social conventions, as needed. ✓ Offer a range of strategies that may help with personal wellness and coping with stress and help each student to find ways that work for them. ✓ Help students to identify their stressors and to practice the coping strategies that work best for them. using visuals, cues, and modeling.



<p>Providing opportunities to practice self-care, coping, and mental wellness skills, and to generalize them across situations, will be important for learning consolidation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Help students to practice skills and consolidate learning in small groups. ✓ Look for situations on the playground, at nutrition break, during unstructured times, when interacting with different adults and peers, to reinforce and practice personal wellness and social emotional skills. ✓ Provide additional coaching and modeling when learning the skills and help students to apply them during situations when they are stressed or unsettled.
<p>The generalization of skills into the home environment and engaging parents as partners in the learning enhances social-emotional learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Consider a letter home to caregivers/families from the education team with an introduction of the mental health resources being used in the classroom. ✓ Share resources with parents about mental health and wellness, and provide ideas for practicing skills at home ✓ Partner with caregivers to set social emotional learning goals. ✓ Partner with caregivers to find out what coping strategies and mental health practices are working at home and generalize to school where appropriate. ✓ Share adapted materials with visuals or audio, as needed.
<p>Students with special education needs may be at higher risk of some mental health conditions and may express their needs differently.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Become familiar with the students' typical presentation of behaviour, mood, thinking style, and personality, so that you can notice any changes. ✓ Consult with students and caregivers to better understand what you might observe and how you might respond when an individual is stressed, angry, happy, worried, or scared. ✓ Check-in with students often to inquire how they are doing both academically and socially. ✓ Help students identify ways to ask for and accept help when they need it. ✓ Ensure students have a way to communicate their feelings, wants and needs using voice, sign language, visuals, or talking device. ✓ Develop an individual student support plan to promote well-being at school. ✓ Consult with school mental health professionals and make a referral when targeted support is needed.