



New Beginnings

Support for the Mental Health of Young Learners During COVID-19

In normal circumstances, beginning school can be associated with feelings of excitement, nervousness, and curiosity for students (and parents/caregivers). For some children, the transition to kindergarten, or even the return to school after a break or illness, can lead to feelings of worry or distress. It is important to remember that transitions to school require separating from a parent/caregiver, and this can be a stressful adjustment for some children. Separation anxiety is not uncommon for young learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented several challenges that have made the beginning or return to school for all young learners more difficult. In addition to the stress on young families related to the virus and associated public health restrictions, many have had to navigate the start to school via on-line learning, often while managing extra demands and challenges. And we know that some families, particularly those who have been impacted negatively by social, health and economic circumstances, and who are racialized or marginalized, have carried heavier burdens and have been less able to access resources and protective early childhood experiences. Further, because the usual rhythms of the kindergarten classroom and gradual entry into the social environment of school were disrupted, students have had fewer opportunities to enjoy rich interactions and learning experiences that nurture social development. Taken together, the extra layer of burden associated with COVID-19 has interrupted the ability for some young children to consolidate school readiness skills that would make the transition easier.

Fortunately, there are ways to ease the transition to school during this difficult time. When educators make use of evidence-informed support strategies and foster well-being during the early years they set students up for a lifetime of positive engagement, love of learning, and academic success.

Educators, in their relationships with the children and their families, play an essential role in facilitating each child's unique transition (Ministry of Education, Kindergarten Curriculum, page 47).

What You Do Matters

Through caring relationships, welcoming and supportive learning environments, and targeted supports, educators set the foundation for future success in school. Daily activities and practices with an intentional focus on mental health and well-being help students flourish and achieve their potential. Early Years educators know and understand typical stages of development for young learners and are well-placed to notice the first signs of difficulty when they arise for a student. You make a difference.

Mental Health and School Success in the Early Years

When young learners have good mental health, they demonstrate an ability to:

- ▶ develop close and secure adult and peer relationships
- ▶ experience, manage and express a full range of emotions reflective of their cultural identity
- ▶ try new things, with support
- ▶ take enjoyment in activities and interactions
- ▶ show connections with family, community, and culture.



All students can benefit from everyday mental health promotion activities that are designed to meet the unique needs of students in the class. In daily teaching practices and interactions with students, classroom educators support mental health promotion by creating caring and inclusive classrooms, knowing their students, and differentiating instruction to build on students' unique strengths. Connectedness is the sense of being cared for, being valued, and belonging. It is a powerful protective factor in mental health and is central to creating mentally healthy schools.

A focus of Early Years programming is to help to develop the whole child, helping students to grow in their own sense of self and identity. When educators provide learning opportunities and interactions that are identity affirming and recognize and celebrate the child's uniqueness, their cultural background, and special interests it helps foster their identity as a capable learner and a valued member of the classroom community. Conversely, when students find themselves in situations where they do not experience success (academic and/or social), or when they feel fearful or uncertain, they may show frustration or anger, or may internalize feelings of low-self-esteem, resulting in them feeling incompetent and disengaged from the learning process. When a young student shows frustration or becomes aggressive, it may be a signal that they are feeling fearful or overwhelmed and they may need help finding words to reflect their experience and needs.

Calm, predictable, and welcoming classroom environments can help young learners to feel safe, understood, and cared for when away from their primary caregivers in the home. Modeling for the whole class everyday practices to support mental health and explicitly teaching about feelings and corresponding vocabulary in a manner that is consistent with the cultural identity of students can help promote positive mental health (see [Everyday Mental Health Classroom Resource](#) or [Faith and Wellness](#) and the [Virtual Field Trips – Early Years and Primary Division](#) from School Mental Health Ontario). The [Emotions Charade](#) activity from the Everyday Mental Health series may be a fun way to learn about emotions and the [Daily Check-in](#) activity can be a helpful way to gauge emotions.

Signs that Young Children are Having Difficulty Adjusting to School

Young children cannot always express their feelings in words, so it sometimes shows up in other signals of distress. For example, when young children are having difficulty adjusting to school you may notice:

- ▶ parent /caregiver reports of hesitancy and worry about attending school
- ▶ arriving late or frequent absences from school
- ▶ crying and distress when separating from a caregiver
- ▶ asking to go home
- ▶ physical discomfort like having a sore stomach or headaches
- ▶ angry words or aggressive behaviour
- ▶ refusal to follow instructions or participate as requested
- ▶ a need for physical closeness to adults
- ▶ feeling overwhelmed, tired, or sad
- ▶ avoiding social interactions
- ▶ withdrawing from tasks
- ▶ difficulty concentrating
- ▶ repeatedly asking the same questions
- ▶ difficulty forming and maintaining peer relationships



Ways to Support Students

If a student is showing signals like these, it can be helpful to put some evidence-informed strategies in place. First, when interacting with young children it is important to ensure that their basic biological needs are being met. Are children coming to school hungry or over tired? If these needs are addressed and problems persist, the strategies below may be of assistance. You already do many of these things as part of your practice but may want to pay extra attention to these techniques when students are struggling in the classroom. You know your students best, so you will use your professional judgement to adapt these for the students you serve:

- ▶ Establish consistent, explicit daily routines (particularly for arrival and end of day).
- ▶ Establish a caring relationship with each student so they feel safe and supported at school. Be that warm person, and a reason a student wants to come to school.
- ▶ Be a good observer and notice when a child may be having a challenging time coming to school or connecting.
- ▶ Take time to reflect on particular fears and worries that may be contributing to a student's adjustment difficulties. Gather insights and ideas from parents/ caregivers, as partners to a successful transition to school for their child.
- ▶ Engage in identity-affirming, individualized strategies to welcome learners. Ensure that all see themselves represented in the classroom.
- ▶ Use check-in routines to find out how students are feeling.
- ▶ Provide time in the day for free play, allowing students time to manage any stress they are feeling, in ways that are comfortable for them (e.g., quiet time alone, playing with a small group, connection with an adult).
- ▶ Structure intentional pairings with a peer with similar interests during free play.
- ▶ Give them space and time to talk about and learn about what interests them. Let them explore their environment.
- ▶ Share an exciting activity for students to look forward to the next day, after the weekend or following a school break.
- ▶ When public health guidelines allow, encourage children to bring a favourite object from home to help with transitions (from home to school and/or from school to home).
- ▶ Model the use of calming strategies with young children who are experiencing challenges managing their emotions. For example, [Deep Belly Breathing and Snowstorm in a Bag](#) are age-appropriate strategies that can help students when they are feeling unsettled.
- ▶ For students who may be hesitant to talk or engage, provide gentle encouragement and notice steps toward participation. Create opportunities for gradual entry. Follow the child's lead regarding what might be comfortable on any given day.
- ▶ Establish a quiet area in the classroom where students can take time for a restorative activity or rest.
- ▶ Reach out to parents/caregivers regularly so they feel comfortable connecting with you. Note what is going well and even small accomplishments with transition. Invite input related to barriers they or their child may be experiencing at school (e.g., need for a translator, specific fears).



Managing Stress Behaviour in the Classroom

As students learn the new routines of school and ways to learn alongside new classmates, it is not uncommon for young children to engage in actions that may be harmful to others. Naturally, it is important to remain calm and to use a neutral and supportive tone when interacting with students during these challenging moments. At these times, young children may need assistance from an adult to help them to express their feelings in words, or in less harmful ways. Providing this gentle direction, and helping the child to repair any harm, is often enough.

At other times, you may notice a pattern of behaviour for particular students that requires a little more intervention. Sometimes, with careful observation, educators can determine the sorts of things that lead to stress behaviour for the student, and can modify the classroom environment so these incidents are less likely to occur (e.g., create groupings of students where individuals tend to get along well together, provide extra prompts before transitions away from free play, offer frequent reminders about sharing and caring for our friends, ask the student to take on a special role when they need extra support). Naming frustrations and modeling ways to deal with disappointment or conflict can also be helpful.

It is important to recognize that stress behaviour may not be the result of an immediate circumstance. It may be a release of accumulated stress and sadness related to COVID-19, traumatic events, or situations of chronic strain (e.g., poverty, racism, etc). Especially during the pandemic, many young learners carry very heavy burdens to school each day. As partners in education, parents/caregivers can often provide strategies that have been helpful in the past. Talking with the child at a calm time about things that could make them feel better may also help.

Getting Support for Student Mental Health at School

Starting school is a significant transition for young children. It is important to take the time to allow students to settle into their new environment, and for you to get to know their strengths and needs. Take time to try out some of the above strategies for those students who are struggling with adjustment longer than expected.

When despite all your best strategies and support a student continues to experience challenges, you may wish to reach out for additional help from school or board support staff. Every board has a Mental Health Leader who can provide guidance, and many boards also have front-line school mental health professionals like social workers and psychological services staff who can offer additional support. It will be helpful to these staff members if you are able to describe something about the *intensity* and *frequency* of the concerns you have noted. To determine this, consider the following questions:

- ▶ Have the behaviours persisted longer than what would be considered typical given the age, stage, and circumstances?
- ▶ Is the student experiencing a level of distress that is impacting their functioning at school?
- ▶ Is the intensity of the student's reaction significantly more than would be expected given their situation and the context?

Given your expertise in serving young children, and knowing your students best, working in partnership with school mental health professionals can be the best approach. Do not hesitate to reach out for assistance following the Circle of Support process in your school. You are not alone in this, and others are available to help you to support the mental health and well-being of your students.

