



Communication Strategies to Support the Mental Health of Students Accessing Special Education Supports and Services

Students with early speech, language and communication difficulties are at greater risk for developing social, emotional, and behavioural problems, as well as mental health disorders in adolescence. At school, ongoing speech and language difficulties may result in limited access to the curriculum, social isolation, withdrawal and poor social relationships. Students may struggle with expressing how they feel, recounting their experiences, advocating for what they need or asking for help with a mental health problem.

Keep in mind:

- ▶ All students have something to say although they may communicate in different ways.
- ▶ Communication can be verbal, non-verbal or via technology.
- ▶ Communication, language and vocabulary can be unique across cultures.
- ▶ Behaviour can be one way of communicating when we don't have the words or means to let others know how we are feeling or what we need.
- ▶ Visuals help all types of learners communicate especially during times of distress.

These key communication strategies can help promote inclusion in mentally healthy learning environments (both in-person and virtual) and support the well-being of students accessing special education supports and services by developing their mental health literacy skills:



Create a communication-friendly learning environment where everyone feels they are welcome, they belong, and they are included.

When we create a classroom that includes visuals, communication supports and differentiated language strategies, we give opportunity to all students to be heard, to be understood, and to contribute.

- ▶ **Create a mentally healthy learning environment with routines and structures that reflects all the ways students communicate and learn.**
 - Use assistive technology, graphic organizers, visuals etc. to support learning and communication.
 - Provide opportunities for everyone's voice and ideas to be heard, including those using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).
 - Foster inclusion by ensuring each student has a way and opportunity to communicate, socially interact, and learn with peers.
- ▶ **Model self-talk and problem-solving during everyday teachable moments.**
 - "I need to take a deep breath."
 - "I believe in me."
 - "I made a mistake, but I can try another way."
- ▶ **Empower learners to communicate their own needs with support and practice.**

Teach and model ways to ask for help, take a break, and/or protest (Use visuals when needed, or embed in communication devices and over virtual platforms).

 - Requesting: "I need help," "I need a break" / use a visual break card or nonverbal signal.
 - Protesting: No," "Stop," "I don't like that," "All done."

[Mentally Healthy
Classroom Reflection Tool](#)

[Four Finger Affirmations
Social-emotional learning
poster](#)

[Solve That Problem](#)

[Would You Rather?](#)

Promote social connection through modelling conversation skills.

One way to build caring relationships and get to know students is through communication and conversations. Learning about student interests, preferences and cultural context helps build connection and lets them know they matter. When we know and understand students' lived experiences, we can give them better help. When they know we care and affirm their identities, students are more likely to be actively engaged and ask for help when they need it.

- ▶ **Frequently engage students in conversations by showing genuine interest and curiosity in who they are, what they like, and what they are learning.**
- ▶ **Integrate the instruction and practice of social communication into genuine interactions and daily routines throughout the day.**
 - Teach and model turn-taking, listening, perspective-taking, making comments, asking questions and complimenting.
 - Consider sentence starters, social scripts and social stories.

[Start Well](#)

[2x10 Strategy](#)

[Daily Greetings](#)

[Talking Circles-
Secondary](#)

[Listen Believe
Act](#)

[Conversation
Starters](#)



Develop emotional vocabulary through oral language.

A student's ability to name and recognize emotions helps students attune to their own needs and to the feelings of others. Building this emotional awareness helps students to develop empathy, compassion, and positive relationships. Students with language difficulties benefit from targeted strategies to learn and apply emotional vocabulary.

- ▶ **Teach emotional vocabulary using labelling, definitions and synonyms within the context of understanding facial expressions, gestures, body language or tone. Be mindful that emotion is expressed and named differently across cultures and lived experience.**
- ▶ **Notice, label, and validate students' feelings in the moment.**
 - "It makes sense you are feeling...when...", "I hear that you are feeling..."
- ▶ **Use stories, books or videos to introduce or reinforce emotional vocabulary.**
- ▶ **Ensure communication visuals and augmentative and alternative communication aids have rich emotional vocabulary available.**

[Feelings
Flashcards](#)

[Mood Meter](#)

[Read Alouds](#)

[See and Say How
You Feel](#)

Support the ability to tell a story and recount a personal event.

Being able to tell a story to others about what happened and how it made you feel is important to feeling understood and making sense of personal experiences; this is fundamental to mental health and understanding how thoughts, feelings and behaviours are connected.

- ▶ **Teach skills to tell a story with sequence events.**
 - Use visuals/graphic organizers to anchor a story.
- ▶ **Wait until after emotions settle before asking a student what happened to them.**
 - Use a mix of sentence starters, scaffolding strategies and questions to help a student tell their story. Remember to pause and allow time for the student to answer. "Where were you?" ... "So you were outside, tell me what happened?" ... "and what happened next?" "How did it make you feel?"
- ▶ **Use scripts to teach students how to advocate for what they need, including asking for help with a mental health problem.**
 - "I feel...when...and I need...", "I've been feeling _____ lately. Can I get your help?"

[Conversation Starters](#)

[Reaching Out](#)

[I in Image](#)



Use visuals to support understanding and communicating.

Communicating thoughts, needs and feelings using visuals can help students feel understood and less frustrated. When visuals are provided to enhance understanding, students may feel less anxious about what to do, or what's to come. Visual instructions can enhance inclusion, independence, and feelings of self-competence, which promotes positive mental health.

- ▶ **Partner with students to create visuals that are meaningful to them to help students communicate their feelings, choices, and preferences.**
- ▶ **Use visuals to enhance learning and help students anticipate what comes next, or to prompt the steps of task completion.**
 - Use visuals as a universal tool to support the whole class, in addition to tailored visuals to meet the unique needs of a student.
 - Visual schedules, first-then-next, choice boards, step-by-step visual instructions, graphic organizers.
- ▶ **Ensure visuals are always available across learning and social settings.**
 - Post visual schedules and communication boards in all learning environments inside and outside, or virtually.
 - Augmentative and Alternative Communication devices should move with the student.
 - Make visuals accessible on lanyards, keyrings, notebooks etc.

[Mood-Check-In](#)

[Things I Can Change
\(part of Equity social
media bundle\)](#)

[Practising Gratitude](#)

Partner with parent(s)/ caregiver(s) to help develop and reinforce communication strategies that promote strength-based mental health both at home and at school.

- ▶ **Learn about culture specific vocabulary or strategies used at home that may help support the student in the classroom.**
- ▶ **Include vocabulary in the student's first language in addition to English on choice boards and visuals.**
- ▶ **Share culturally responsive, identity affirming visuals, oral language strategies, books and routines that help support mental health in the classroom and that may further support the student at home.**

Speech, language and communication skills are important for the development of academic achievement as well as psychological well-being. As an educator you do make a difference, and by providing these key strategies in the learning environment you are promoting the mental health of all students and bolstering the skills of students accessing special education supports and services. If you require any support to implement these strategies, or have concerns about the speech, language or communication skills of students, please consult with your school speech-language pathologist.

