

# Understanding & Bolstering Student Mental Health

Insights • Resources  
• Strategies



As many as 25% of children and adolescents worldwide experience anxiety and depression.\* This stress can affect a student's cognitive abilities and behavior in the classroom.

As educators, you are on the front lines of helping children navigate adverse conditions and hard moments so that they are able to learn. We've compiled these resources to help you:

- Understand what's happening in the brain and body when students, families, and staff experience stress and the effects of this response on learning and daily functioning
- Explore strategies to promote student self-regulation in school and at home
- Integrate self-regulation strategies as part of a culture of care in school
- Encourage students and families to practice regulation strategies at home



If you have questions or would like to learn more about how [ParentPowered's family engagement curriculum](#) for birth through grade 12 can help your district support families in building SEL skills at home, [reach out](#).

\*Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19, JAMA Pediatrics, August 2021

## Understanding the Biology of Stress

When children are activated by stress, it can be hard for them to concentrate, process information, and connect with others. Essentially, stress can make it hard for students to learn and participate in the class community.

To learn more about what’s happening in the brain when students experience a stress response, check out these resources.

1. [PBS Learning](#) offers quick clips (5–10 minutes) specifically designed to orient educators around the impact of stress and trauma on the brain and the resulting effect on learning. The series is led by Dr. Bruce Perry whose teachings have had significant impact on decreasing adverse behaviors and creating safe and supportive classroom environments.
2. The [Child Trauma Academy](#) offers a host of articles and short “seven slide videos” detailing the effect of early trauma on brain structure and functioning.
3. For educators working with young children, [Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child](#) has created numerous resources (podcasts, videos, research reports) orienting educators around brain development and the role that early relationships and experiences play in how children learn, express themselves, and relate to others.

## FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

When parents and caregivers understand the biology of stress, they are better able to interpret and respond to their child’s behaviors. By orienting parents around this topic, you help nurture positive and responsive relationships in every area of a child’s life. You help your students arrive at school regulated and ready to learn! Consider sharing these resources with parents and caregivers.

1. [Here’s an animated video](#) that explains the biology of stress in engaging, relatable ways.
2. [In this 2-minute video](#), Dr. Daniel Siegel illustrates the effect of stress on the brain using his hand to provide a visual example of what happens when we “flip our lid”.



## Recognizing When a Student Is Activated

What are the signs that a student may be experiencing traumatic stress? When educators can answer this question for each child in their classroom, it becomes easier to respond when a child becomes activated and even notice and respond BEFORE it happens. These resources will help you recognize the signs of traumatic stress and respond to those signs.

1. Though the signs of traumatic stress are different for each child, [SAMHSA](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) offers a list of behaviors to look out for at different ages and stages of development.
2. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has created a series of 2-page articles describing the psychological and behavioral impact of trauma on differing ages. Each includes a list of signs and behaviors that indicate when a student might be experiencing a stress response.

- [Preschool](#)
- [Elementary School](#)
- [Middle School](#)
- [High School](#)

## FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Parents and caregivers play a critical role in orienting teachers to how their children learn best — things that might make it harder for them to learn and strategies for helping them stay regulated. Consider asking parents to share insights they have into situations and circumstances that might lead their children to feel stress. You might survey parents with the following questions. (Make sure to translate into families' home language.)

- Just like at home, children experience lots of emotions at school. What are some ways we might be able to tell if your child is feeling excited? What are some ways we might be able to tell if your child is feeling upset or anxious?
- All students learn differently. Are there people, places, or things, that help your child to focus and learn? How about feel confident and strong? Are there any things that might make it harder for your child to feel comfortable and ready to learn?



# Helping Students Return to Calm and to Learning (Regulate)

When a student experiences a stress response, educators often play a key role in helping them to regain a state of calm so that they can “return to learning.” The strategies below can be used one-on-one with individual students AND together as a class. The more these regulation strategies become routines within your classroom, the more you’ll be supporting the wellbeing of all students (and your own wellbeing, too).

## Breathing

Deep breathing signals the brain and body to relax. This response helps students navigate away from a state of stress and into a calmer state that allows them to think and learn.

- **Belly Breathing** can be a great way to help young children take deep and calming breaths. [Try introducing “belly breathing” with this Sesame Street Song.](#)
- **Five Finger Breathing** can be a great way to track and visualize breathing at any age. [This illustration will orient you around how it works.](#)
- **Box Breathing** can be great for older students and students who may be hesitant to participate in other breathing exercises. You can let students know that box breathing is used by star athletes and even soldiers.

## Muscle Relaxation

When kids relax their muscles, they reduce both physical tension and psychological stress. Tensing muscles before releasing them helps the body to relax even more fully. The “Push, Pull, Drop” exercise is a great “tense and release” activity that can be done in a chair (and even without anyone really noticing). [Learn how in this quick video.](#)

## Orienting

Just noticing things around the room can help students from spiraling into a state of anxiety. It helps to ground students in the moment. [The 5-4-3-2-1 method](#) helps kids quickly cue into their surroundings.

## Mindfulness

Ritualizing mindfulness moments to start the day, following transitions, and before engaging in focused thinking can be a great way to help kids regulate and relax into learning. [In this video you’ll see how a “mindful minute”](#) has become part of one teacher’s classroom.

You might also check out these [5 mindful movements](#).

## Shifting Focus

When students are experiencing a stress response you can help them shift their focus. One way to do this is by giving them a job to do. For example, if a student seems activated, consider giving them a note to take down to the office. You might also shift focus by asking a student to tell you about something they love. For example, “Tell me about your soccer game last weekend.” [Here are more tips for helping students shift focus.](#)

## Calming Corners

It helps to have a space that students can choose to go to if they are feeling overwhelmed with big emotions. This video quickly walks you through [tips and tricks for setting up a calming corner](#) in your classroom.

And in this video, an educator highlights [ways that a calming corner can be used to help resolve conflict](#) between students.

## Naming Emotions

One of the fastest ways for students to regulate emotions is to name their feelings. Just naming feelings helps kids (and adults) feel more in control. This [mood meter](#) from the Wisconsin Office of Children’s Mental Health can be used to help students identify, name, and regulate their emotions.

# FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Children will be better able to use these strategies if they’re practicing them at school AND at home. Consider sharing the videos with parents and caregivers. Parents also have unique insights into things that help their child to regulate. Consider reaching out to parents to ask: *“What are some things that help your child to calm down when they are feeling anxious or upset?”*



# Creating a School Culture of Care

## A Positive and Responsive School Climate

When children feel safe, supported, and valued at school they are better able to relax, regulate, and engage in learning. Many factors go into this equation including relationships with teachers and other students, the physical environment of the classroom, predictable routines, responsive instruction, representation, and family involvement (just to name a few). Here are some resources to help ensure that your school is a place that children feel safe, supported, and valued.

### Classroom Environment

- Fordham Institute offers [tips on creating classrooms that support great learning](#).
- HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences) orients providers around [4 building blocks](#) to help ensure that the classroom supports students' ability to self-regulate, connect with others, learn, and have positive experiences.
- This article by The Aspen Institute offers a series of [case studies](#) highlighting ways that schools have supported student development through school culture.
- For more tips on creating a responsive classroom:
  - [Cultivating a Classroom That Represents Students](#)
  - [Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies](#)

### Relationships

Students' ability to self-regulate develops through caring and responsive interactions with caregivers such as parents and teachers. To successfully manage thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, children need caring adults to help. The process through which this help occurs is called co-regulation. In this article, the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy describes [common co-regulation supports that children and adolescents need](#) at different developmental ages.

### Permission to Feel — The Power of Modeling and Normalizing

Talking about feelings is a critical part of working through challenging moments. But sharing about feelings can be hard, especially if this is something a child is not used to doing. Classroom rituals that normalize “talking about feelings” helps kids share. This might take the form of daily check-ins about emotions or giving kids the chance to share highs and lows from their day. Daily read-alouds also offer opportunities to talk about characters' feelings and spark discussions about times kids have felt similar to, and different from, the characters in the books. When teachers model ways to talk about feelings it supports the idea that it's always okay to share. Here are two book lists specifically focused on children's books about BIG feelings:

1. [Childhood 101](#)
2. [Book Riot](#)

## Educator Wellbeing

Creating a culture of care for students begins with creating a culture of care for all school staff. This [workbook helps educators reflect on their own wellbeing](#).

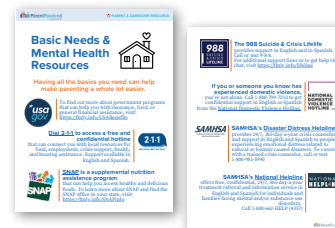
And in this report from EdResearch For Recovery, school leaders will find [summaries of research based structural supports for increasing educator wellbeing](#).

# FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

When parents and caregivers feel supported, they are better able to remain calm and responsive so they can help their children regulate. A critical piece of this is ensuring that families have access to their basic needs like food, housing, and healthcare. Here are two resources that will help families access support:

This resource orients families to some of the services available to them:

[English](#)  
[Spanish](#)



And this resource guides families through tips and strategies for reaching out and getting support:

[English](#)  
[Spanish](#)



And remember, when you partner with families, you'll learn more about children's home lives, languages, traditions, and cultures. This knowledge can guide you in responding to children's unique needs and creating classrooms and learning experiences that represent all students. This is critical to helping everyone to feel safe, secure, and valued so they're able to regulate and learn.

Here are [tips for partnering with families](#) from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement and the Office of Head Start.

