

The First 10 Days (and Beyond)

Creating Caring Connections and Supporting Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the Return to School

Getting ready

While the last two years have presented many challenges for students and staff alike, everyone has done their best to support students and manage the uncertainties. This year, we are continuing to welcome students back to school with hope and optimism, while recognizing the uncertainty that remains and the range of experiences that students will bring as they re-enter the classroom, in-person or remotely. So, how do we proceed?

We proceed together.

It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another, as we step forward together through uncertain times (*Wheatley, 2004*).

We learn.

We continue to learn and adapt to needed safety protocols and we use our experiences to build good learning environments whether in-person or through remote or hybrid means. And to truly receive students well, and to honour the vast range of experiences and emotions that they will bring in their backpacks, we need to educate ourselves about other things too.

We need to reflect deeply on instances of systemic racism and anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism and anti-Indigenous racism in our society, and on the impact of colonial practices and inequities that have been amplified through the pandemic. We need to see students as they begin this school year, to welcome them warmly and personally, and give them space to tell their story. We need to ground this work in anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices. And we need to learn how to prioritize mental health and well-being at school and build confidence in noticing when students might require a helping hand in this area.

We build on what we know.

We learned so much working together the last two years. We solved problems and adapted to an ever-changing learning environment. Let's continue to build on these foundations and mobilize existing resources and supports to ensure we are ready to serve students' mental health needs. Your board mental health leader, and your superintendent with responsibility for mental health, have worked with key stakeholders to develop a plan for a mentally healthy return to school that is rooted in your board's foundational work. In the same way, you can build on your board's work in equity and inclusion.

We connect the dots.

We need to continue to think in integrated ways and save time and energy where we can. In the midst of the difficulty, loss and disruption, the pandemic revealed efficiencies and innovations, and new opportunities for collaboration and sharing. We can look for ways to connect and share ideas and resources across schools and boards, and with community partners.

We remain flexible.

No one knows what the future holds. Plans we create today may need to change tomorrow. We can be gentle with ourselves, and each other, and keep doing the best we can.





Background to this resource

The *First 10 Days* resource was created by practicing school mental health professionals and educators, alongside School Mental Health Ontario. It is not meant to be prescriptive. It offers a range of ideas to help you to get the school year off to a good start. You can certainly substitute different activities or modify strategies to fit with your class grade and complement. You can stretch the learning over more than ten days or condense it into fewer days. You know your students best. The ideas here are meant to spark ideas.

The activities outlined in the resource focus on relationships, connection and community. They are designed to help students ease into school routines. That will allow them time to learn and practice skills to cope with emotions and challenges they may encounter in coming weeks. As they learn ways for supporting social-emotional skills and mental health, students can create a “toolbox” of strategies to practice throughout the year in and outside school.

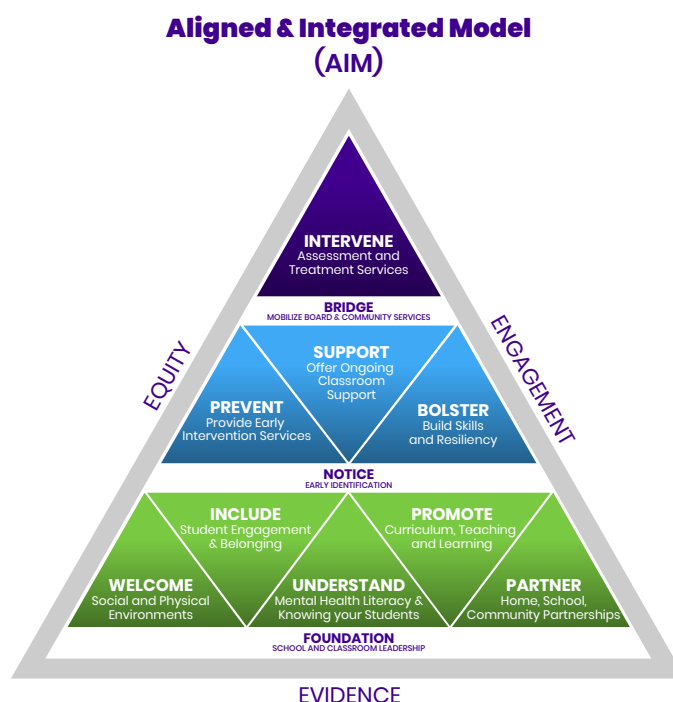
Ideas within the *First 10 Days* are meant to be used universally, class-wide. All students will benefit from a chance to debrief, build relationships, feel a sense of safety and belonging, calm anxiety, and re-engage with learning when they return to school.

As such, this resource highlights wellness promotion strategies (**tier 1**), that can be differentiated to help every student with the transition back to school. Some students will benefit from many of these strategies, plus perhaps more time, and more support, to re-engage with school. For example, some students have missed key instruction and learning because of uneven access to internet, health issues, pre-existing mental health problems, or other barriers to learning the last two years. They may feel very anxious about returning to school. These students may need an extra chance to catch up in their learning, to talk through their emotions and experiences, gradually return to school, or access dedicated prevention or early intervention support (**tier 2**). A smaller number of students will experience significant mental health needs, requiring urgent and/or intensive professional mental health services (**tier 3**).

As an educator, your role is to lead with universal activities like those noted in this resource, but to be watchful and notice when a student might need more or different kinds of support. For more information on the services and pathways available, please connect with your principal, school social worker, psychological services staff, or equity and inclusion lead.

The *First 10 Days* is meant to be a flexible resource. While it is designed for use in a physical classroom setting, you can modify many of the ideas for remote learning. Although there are certainly important differences between a face-to-face and a virtual learning environment, relationship-building strategies translate well between these two modalities.

Creating caring connections and trust with your learners helps students to know that they matter – that their uniqueness is celebrated, and voice is heard. Students learn best when they feel safe, valued and certain that they belong.





Setting the stage through relationship-building

The following relationship-building strategies are particularly important to help students transition from the last two unique years into the 2022-2023 school experience.

- Acknowledge the challenges of the previous two school years.
- Establish (in-person or remote) back-to-school social events to allow peers and staff to re-connect. Consider opportunities to spend time with classmates or teachers from last year.
- Acknowledge that returning to school will be exciting for some, challenging for others.
- Recognize the unique transition challenges of those re-entering school from remote learning, or entering a new school, either due to moving or aging up (e.g., kindergarten, entering high school, or transitioning from a school in a First Nation community). Provide additional opportunities to get acquainted.
- Work with feeder schools to see if/what transition activities occurred before or during school closures.
- Consider matching up peer-buddies, particularly for students who may be at risk of a challenging transition. Peer-buddies can include same-grade peers or matching older and younger students.
- If possible, consider a long-term plan to bolster the process of welcoming students to school each day (e.g., have staff greeting students as they exit the bus or at drop-off locations).
- Continue routines to make students feel welcomed as they enter the building each day.
- Make concerted efforts to build the school community and establish staff/student relationships (e.g., have staff learn, and correctly pronounce student names, and use identified pronouns, even for those not in their classes).
- Anticipate significant fatigue and sleepiness, particularly among adolescents.
- Teach and re-teach expectations and routines and be patient and positive with students remembering that these routines and expectations have changed significantly and frequently over the last two years.
- Role model the behaviours and coping strategies you are hoping the students will follow.
- Consider opportunities for students to work cooperatively, feel empowered and assist others, which can prove restorative following significant disruption and collective stress.
- Provide students with ample opportunities to share concerns, challenges, ideas and needs. Student voice and agency helps to build a sense of control and resilience during uncertain times.

(Adapted from *School Re-entry Considerations: Supporting Student Social and Emotional Learning and Mental and Behavioural Health Amidst COVID-19 (2020)*. American School Counsellors Association and National Association of School Psychologists.)





Day one – welcome!

Imagine you are arriving in a new place, one that is familiar in some ways, but unusual and a little unsettling in other ways. A place that you both know...and do not know. You are arriving with heavy bags and aren't sure you can put them down just yet, because you aren't sure if you are safe, or if you belong there.

How might you feel?

What would help you to feel more comfortable?

What would help you to feel more confident?

One thing that might help is having a caring guide. Someone to help you to find your way, carry your luggage, and get you settled in. Even though you yourself may not feel completely confident or comfortable, for your students, you are the caring guide.

Here's what you can do to help students feel more comfortable and confident about day one.

Provide a warm welcome –

- For in-person learning environments, post positive, hopeful messages around the classroom that inspire a sense of wellness and belonging. You can share similar messages in remote learning by using the chat window or putting posters on a wall.
- Greet students by name when you can, making eye contact and letting them know you are happy to see them.
- Share a welcome message/video for students and family members that briefly discusses how you will be starting the year, ways to support one another, etc.
- Take extra time to greet students who are new to the school, returning to in-person learning from remote learning, or who you know may have experienced a difficult time during COVID, or who have not engaged with school lately, and let them know how happy you are to see them.

Allow time to talk – Students may need the opportunity to talk about their feelings and experiences related to the previous two school years and experiences during COVID-19. Validate their perspectives and acknowledge the uncertainties that might still exist for some students. Highlight that you will all do your best as a class and school community to support one another through all of this.

Have some conversation starters ready to inspire discussion that is both safe and meaningful. This means balancing dialogue about challenges with messages of hope. Examples:

- “What I learned, or appreciated, during the last school year was...”
- “One thing I’m looking forward to this school year is...”

Discuss personal choices related to safety – public health guidelines may continue to be fluid. Model for students that each of our experiences is unique and that it's important to be respectful of the choices that individuals make (e.g., continuing to wear masks).





Engage in a welcoming activity – You can introduce any number of different activities that can help to acclimatize students to the new school year, and to build a sense of classroom community. Remember to include those who are learning remotely into community-building activities. Here are a few ideas to start.

- Work on setting up a calming space in the classroom where students select or place items that they think would help (e.g., low light, mindful colouring pages, music station, etc.).
- Invite students to create a journal entry or video related to features of a welcoming classroom. What does it sound like, look like, feel like? (e.g., What do I need to feel safe, or safer, at school given everything that has happened this past year? How can I welcome someone new to the school? How can we make everyone feel welcome?).
- Engage in a “get to know you” activity. For example, ask students to pick a number between 1 and 3, or hand out cards randomly with 1, 2, 3 written on them. They then have to tell that many things about themselves.
- Read a story about new beginnings, managing change, etc. (e.g., [The Day You Begin by Jacqueline Woodson](#)). Invite students to reflect on what it is like

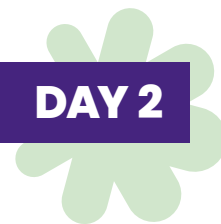
to start a new school year in a new classroom with students and a teacher they may not know, and some good first steps they can take to get to know each other.

Spend time with students needing more assistance –

Some students need a little more support in transitioning to school. Students who are starting kindergarten, high school, returning to in person from remote learning, or moving to a new school will require more support as they settle into their new setting. Former grade 12 students who are returning for a 5th year may be sensitive about this. They may benefit from a recognition that their cohort had a rough two years, and that taking an extra year is a sensible decision for them. Check in with students who may need a bit more encouragement and support throughout the day. Additionally, recognize that, depending on their age and understanding, students may be attuned to increased awareness of systemic racism, oppression, and hate in the wider society.

Educator’s note: Welcoming practices will call on educators to reflect on how well they know their students, many of whom may be new to their class. *Greater Good in Education* have developed a helpful resource, [Making Families Feel Welcome](#), which provides a research-based list of methods for helping families of all backgrounds feel welcome in the school community.





Day two – co-creating classroom norms

Building on the reflections and practises from day one, you can begin to co-create classroom norms and expectations with your students. In contrast to rules, which are (usually) teacher/school generated, norms are an agreement among members of a classroom or school about how they will treat one another. Day two is designed to establish the classroom environment as a safe and inclusive space by co-creating the norms for interactions throughout each learning day.

Tips for co-creating classroom expectations and norms

When introducing your class to the process, state that the goal is to develop a class culture where everyone feels included and valued. Because everyone is an important contributing member of the classroom community, everyone has a chance to shape the norms.

You may be used to creating norms together as a class.

What may be different this year is how you respond to lingering worry related to the pandemic. For example, you may need to reflect on respecting individual choices for mask wearing, physical distancing, and how to respond when someone seems ill. It may be important to highlight in advance that if someone gets sick it does not mean that they have COVID-19. And if a classmate does become ill, we need to be caring and compassionate, and avoid any blaming or stigmatizing behaviour.

Getting started – Using developmentally-appropriate language, help students to define what it means to have a learning environment that feels safe. For example:

“One of the most important parts of being part of this learning community is making sure we take care of each other so everyone can learn. That means creating a learning environment that feels safe. What are ways you can feel safe or unsafe both physically (in your body) or emotionally (in your feelings)? What is the difference between physical safety and emotional safety? What can cause someone to feel emotionally unsafe? Why is it important that we create a classroom that everyone feels safe and ready to learn?”

For younger students (primary/junior) consider using a mentor text to build a focus on empathy and community caring and inclusion (e.g., read [Be Kind by Pat Zietlow Miller \(available in French\)](#)). What does it mean to be kind? This story focuses on ways that we can help and include others. Invite students to discuss ways that they can be kind and support one another at school.

Brainstorm – Share ideas for classroom shared agreements. Record students’ ideas (using their own words) for what they need to feel safe this year, and/or how they will treat others, so they feel safe. You can do this on large graffiti paper in small groups, or as a full class in other ways.

Finalize shared agreements – As a class, group similar ideas and narrow their brainstorm to five or six statements that capture what students have identified. Consider where the final agreements will be posted (virtually or in- person) so that together with your students, you can refer to it and practice the norms often.

(Source: <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/sample-lesson-plan-generating-classroom-shared-agreements/>)





Day three – you are unique and valued

The pandemic has not only affected our sense of health and safety, but it has also amplified inequities and injustice in our society. Some experienced more challenges than others, often because of differences in the social determinants of health (e.g., income, language, discrimination, etc.). We witnessed multiple instances of system racism, and particularly anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism and anti-Indigenous racism brought to the surface in painful reality. Many students and families that we serve, as well as community and staff members, have been deeply affected by this difficult time in our society. We all have a role to play in addressing inequities, injustice, and oppressive practices.

We need to give special attention to building students' sense of identity and mattering as they return to school this fall. Learning environments where students' identities are affirmed and valued have culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy at the heart. They reflect a commitment to a deep knowledge of students, in order to create an environment where everyone feels welcome and included.

Here are some ideas for building a sense of identity and belonging.

Teach us your name – Have each student tell their name, then teach the class how to pronounce it the way they want it said, and something about their name's meaning (e.g., named after my aunt, my name means "peace" in my language; my name is Nikhil and I like to be called Nikhil; my name is Jessica and I like to be called Jess, etc.) Invite students to share their pronouns (e.g., he/him, they/them, ze/zir, she/her, etc.) to show respect for gender diversity in the classroom.

Something you want me to know – This activity allows the student to take ownership of the information they wish to share, while providing a safe way to introduce themselves to you as their new teacher. Ask students to think about something that is important to them that they would like to share with you (e.g., something they are proud of, something about their culture or faith, something they may need extra help with, or anything that would help them to be successful this school year). Remind students that the information will not be shared with the class.

Being unique – Facilitate a discussion related to what it means to be unique. Invite students to complete a handout that highlights what makes them unique, for example:

Something I'm passionate about...

Something I'm good at...

People I matter most to...

What I'm grateful for...

Close the exercise with a discussion about how the class can best celebrate uniqueness.

Read [Thunder Boy Jr. - Sherman Alexie \(available in French\)](#), a story focused on name and identity. Invite students to share information about their own names (first or last).

Watch this [video](#) that speaks about the uniqueness of individuals and how it is okay to make mistakes along the way. A discussion at the end of the video could include students' thoughts on how important it is to be authentic, to accept ourselves and to love our imperfections.

Educator's note: Educators are invited to [watch Huda Essa's TedX talk titled "Your Name is the Key"](#) to support their own learning.





Day four – identifying and managing emotions

Each day, from day four through day nine, a new social-emotional skill area will be introduced that can help students to navigate uncertain times, and to feel more confident and capable overall. It is important to remember that students come to school with many skills and strengths, as part of their culture, faith, identities, and communities, and that these can be affirmed and celebrated as a first step. Sharing and encouraging students to share new ideas and strategies for students to explore together is one way to build upon these strengths. In getting to know your students, you will learn their strengths and preferences, and can differentiate these ideas to support your students in good ways.

It is important to take some time for reflection prior to introducing social-emotional activities. In addition to considering your students – their cultures, identities, faiths, and intersectionalities – it is also important to reflect on your own identities, positionality, world views biases, and areas of privilege. It is good to recognize that there is not one “right” way to maintain good mental health and to recognize that the strategies that may work for you, or for some students, may not work well for others. Recognize the beauty in diversity, and invite students, families, and community members to share their ideas and experiences with building wellness as you grow together over the school year or semester. Taking time for reflection, and for considering deeply the experiences of the students you serve, will help to ensure that the ideas you present, along with the ideas shared by students, will be supportive and identity-affirming.

Day four focuses on skills that can help students with identifying and managing emotions. While these skills do not change the situation(s) that contributed to the difficult emotions, it can offer a way to pause, step back, and understand clearly what one is feeling, and why, which may be helpful in establishing a sense of agency. For example, when a young student can understand the connection between the uncomfortable feeling in their stomach, and feeling nervous about going to school (e.g., due to entering a new school or grade, re-entering in-person learning after being a remote learner, previous experiences of racism, homophobia, exclusion, bullying, etc.), it can be a cue to use some strategies that might help them to feel better and connect them

to supports. Students of all ages may be experiencing a range of emotions as they return to school this fall – excited, worried, frustrated, sad, confused etc. Given the unsettled times we experienced over the last two years, they may struggle to identify and express their feelings. Learning to notice different emotions, and name them, can help students to communicate how they are feeling and what they need to navigate through these feelings. It is important to listen and validate the emotions that students are feeling, and to try to understand their perspectives, reflecting back what you have heard.

The following everyday practices can support educators in teaching students skills to notice, name, and navigate emotions.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this social-emotional learning skill.](#)



Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practise this skill (adapt to your students’ developmental level).

Emotion charades – In usual times, this activity can help students to practice expressing emotions with their whole body, and to recognize body language and facial expressions in others. If students are wearing masks, it is much harder to read facial expressions. Challenge students to come up with ways to show various expressions with their eyes and gestures. This will really help students who have difficulty reading non-verbal cues, like establishing a new shared language. The [feeling flash cards](#) can be used in a variety of ways and are suitable for all grades. They are helpful for supporting the identification of, and conversations about feelings. You may consider using them as part of the emotion charades activity.





What's my temperature? – Gauging the intensity of our emotions and energy levels is an important component in the development of self-regulation. Take the emotional temperature in the room and introduce ways to shift the tone to help all students to re-focus. This activity can help students to take their own emotional temperature, so they learn to notice, name, and navigate their emotions.

Realistic thinking and feeling – Students sometimes get into unhealthy habits of thinking where they focus on worries and negative events and lose sight of more positive and optimistic approaches. Being trapped in negative thinking spirals (e.g., I will never be good at math, if I don't make the team I will lose all of my friends) can lead to unpleasant emotions like sadness and anger. This activity helps to reinforce how thinking, feelings, and actions are interrelated, and how breaking the negative thinking cycle can help students to feel better.

It's important to note that some negative thoughts are valid (e.g., negative thoughts related to microaggressions or racist comments/behaviours of others) and should not be treated the same way as unhelpful unrealistic thoughts. When students share thoughts that are related to racism, bullying or other hurtful behaviour, as caring adults it is important to validate their experience and work to address the concerns noted.

Online discussion forum/circle discussion – Lead a discussion about positive ways to express our feelings (e.g., put our feelings into words, draw a picture or write about how we feel, create an art or media project, show our feelings through dance or music).

Read *The Way I Feel by Janan Cain* (available in French) to illustrate how visiting feelings helps us to treat our feelings like guests. We can welcome them in, get to know them, and perhaps learn why they are visiting. Educators may also wish to read *Your Fantastic Elastic Brain: Stretch It, Shape It* by JoAnn Deak ([available in French](#)), which introduces students to the anatomy of the brain and connections to emotions and learning.





Day five – stress management and coping

Every day, students are exposed to big and small challenges. With practice and support, they can learn ways to respond to these challenges and to find good ways forward in the face of obstacles. As we return to school, there may be additional stressful circumstances and changes to navigate for all of us. It is a good time to remind students about their existing coping skills, and to add a few additional ideas to add to their toolkit. Of course, this doesn't mean that students must take on responsibility for managing significant harms and circumstances that require adult or wider system intervention, or that the coping skills suggested would be sufficient in these cases. Still, young people have indicated that they are seeking more ways to cope when they are struggling with their mental health and these ideas may help.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this social-emotional learning skill.](#)



Stress management and coping skills include strategies: like calm breathing, muscle relaxation, distraction, visualization, noticing, and thought-changing techniques. Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practise coping skills (adapt to your students' developmental level).

Deep belly breathing – You can remind students to take slow deep breaths to help them to feel calmer. One way to do this is through a deep belly breathing activity. You can modify this for younger students. Have them imagine they are holding a cup of hot chocolate. Begin by blowing out air to cool the cup, then draw in a deep breath to take in the warm sweet scent. For older students, you may wish to [download our social media bundle](#) with breathing exercises.

Tense and relax – One way to help students to understand how different their body feels when it is relaxed, relative to when it is tensed, is to show them how to engage in progressive muscle relaxation. This activity offers a fun way for students to try this out to see if it can help them to release the stress they may be carrying in their neck, back, jaw, etc. For older students, you may wish to [download our social media bundle](#) with muscle relaxation exercises.

Imaginary walk – In this visualization activity, you can read from a script that helps students to imagine being on a peaceful walk through a beautiful forest. Of course, you can use your own script and make up any sort of guided visualization that your students would relate to and could help them feel calm.

Stress buster bulletin board – To acknowledge that everyone experiences stress, and convey that we are all in this together, you may wish to create a classroom/online bulletin board. It can share strategies that students find helpful for coping with challenges. You may be surprised with the creative ideas that students bring forward. Students will also benefit from normalizing the experience of stress.

Older students may wish to visit the [School Mental Health Ontario student website](#) to access some shareables that can help them with their strategy practice, especially when they are feeling anxious.

Many of the strategies listed above have been modeled and shared in the Virtual Field Trip lesson series on stress management and coping. There are six lessons for every division that include a Minds On, Action (virtual field trip video), and Consolidation. [Visit the School Mental Health Ontario website to find these lessons.](#) They are organized by strategy.

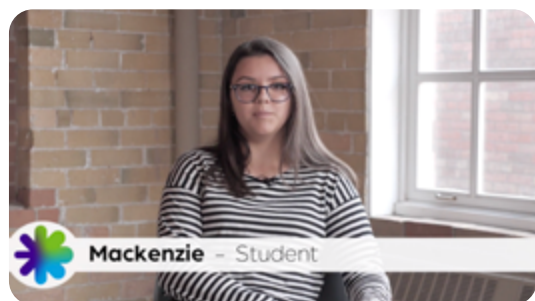




Day six – positive motivation and perseverance

Practices that promote positive motivation encourage students towards optimistic thinking habits. They can help in reframing situations so that students can see alternative explanations, interpretations, and views when facing challenging circumstances that are difficult to change. While it is important to validate difficult circumstances and to appreciate that some students have had much more difficult circumstances in the past two years than others, there is always strength in looking for the positives so that we don't find ourselves feeling overwhelmed by strain and worry. Optimistic thinking, and keeping a long view, has been associated with better mental health outcomes. But it takes practice, especially during challenging times.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this SEL skill.](#)



Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practise this skill (adapt to your students' developmental level).

The power of yet – When facing challenging situations, rather than giving up or using negative self-talk, students can learn the power of “yet”. Adopting a growth mindset, they can say to themselves, “I can’t do that...yet” or “I don’t understand...yet”. This activity helps students to practice this optimistic way of thinking. Consider expanding to with a discussion about how students could reconsider the following thinking traps to reflect the power of yet.

Instead of thinking:

I could try thinking:

I can't do this

I want to give up

I made a mistake

Gratitude moment – This activity can be completed as a group or individually. Ask students to think of something that they are grateful for. Remind them that there is no correct answer and that the something they select can be big or small. Ask students to either share their gratitude with the class in a community circle or privately as a journaling activity. This can become a daily practice (as you start/finish each day, think of one thing you are grateful for and why). You may wish to share the social-emotional learning poster about this practice. Also, [Virtual Field Trip #6](#) focuses on the power of gratitude and hope-finding.

Read *The Thing Lou Couldn't Do* by Ashley Spires ([available in French](#)), a story about what to do when confronted with something difficult. As noted on Day 4, you may also wish to use [Your Fantastic Elastic Brain](#) by JoAnn Deak ([available in French](#)), which introduces students to the anatomy and functions of the brain and helps them to stretch and grow their fantastic brain. For older students, choose a text to help students explore the main characters' use of a growth mindset.



Elementary posters



Secondary posters



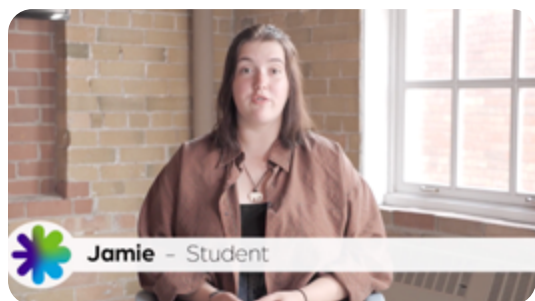


Day seven – healthy relationship skills

Many skills go into building and sustaining relationships. These skills help students to have caring interactions in the classroom that can foster a sense of community, inclusion, and belonging. When students develop these skills together, this can contribute to a safe and caring environment for all students in the classroom, which helps with learning (and teaching).

There are times when we all may feel a little tense and worried, and we may not always be at our best in our interactions with others. Practicing skills of listening, sharing and collaborating at the beginning of this school year can set a positive tone for coming weeks and months. Being generous with each other, and overlooking moments of irritability and frustration, can help us to keep small things small.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this social-emotional learning skill.](#)



Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practise healthy relationship skills (adapt to your students' developmental level and ensure physical distancing requirements met).

Pay it forward – Empathy is an important skill in developing and maintaining healthy relationships. Putting oneself “in another’s shoes” can often provide a new and more compassionate perspective. This activity builds empathy and compassion by encouraging students to notice good qualities in others, and make their peers feel valued.

Cup stack challenge – In this activity, student teams receive a stack of six cups, an elastic, and a piece of string for each person. The challenge is to unstack the cups collaboratively without touching them, and then to restack them into a pyramid using the same strategy. This activity promotes team-building, collaboration and communication skills. It also provides an opportunity to learn about one another’s strengths. You can use similar cooperative challenges to reinforce this skill (e.g., collaboratively completing logic puzzles; playing cooperative, inclusive games, etc.).

Kindness wall (or jar) – In this activity, teachers and students catch random acts of kindness and celebrate them. That happens by posting a note describing the action on a kindness wall bulletin board, and/or placing a bean or button in a jar for every kindness they observe. Kindness grows when we draw attention to it.

Interviews – Pair up students and have one individual talk about something they feel proud of or happy about (e.g., their culture, an accomplishment, a hobby or talent, their pet). The other person actively listens, as if they are a news reporter. They take notes and introduce their partner to the class highlighting what they heard, providing at least three details. Then they switch roles.

Educator’s note: Would you like to learn more about listening and learning with compassion in the classroom? [Check out this article](#) from the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley.





Day eight – self-awareness and identity

Supporting and practicing self-confidence can assist students to value their uniqueness, and to be comfortable expressing their opinions. A critical element of self-confidence for students involves growing and learning to appreciate their identity. Ontario students reflect a wide range of intersecting social and cultural identities, including, but not limited to ancestry, race, culture, gender identity and expression, geographic location, language, mental health and well-being, physical and intellectual ability, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Through these activities students and staff can have intersecting parts of their identity affirmed, and can get to know one another in meaningful ways which contributes to a positive sense of self.

Knowing who you are and holding firm to the person you believe yourself to be – all in the face of life's challenges and choices – is a lifelong skill that can begin to develop in childhood. Educators have a key role in helping to show students that they matter, and that they bring value to the classroom. They can also model identity-affirming practices, and good allyship and support.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this social-emotional learning skill.](#)



Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practise skills related to self-awareness and identity (adapt to your students' developmental level and ensure physical distancing requirements met).

Show and share – The purpose of this activity is to help students to identify important aspects of themselves, and to practice sharing pieces of their identity with classmates. It also helps students to see the value in uniqueness and diversity. It can be done as a circle activity, where students are invited in advance to bring an item or piece of information about themselves to share briefly. Students can also share through journaling, drawing, spoken word, etc.

The I in the image – This activity puts a series of interesting photos around the room and asks students to stand/sit near the picture that they identify with (or like) the most. Have each student explain why they picked that picture.

Self-advocacy cards – In this activity, students complete cards highlighting the type of learner they are and what they need to help them to succeed. Teachers can provide a listing of learning types (I like to learn by observing others, I like to learn by talking with others, I like to learn by listening, I like to learn by looking at pictures, etc.). Other prompts can also be provided: I work best when the class is quiet...the work is chunked into smaller pieces...I can ask a friend for help, etc.

Guess who? – In this activity, students use a folded piece of cardstock to write something about themselves (likes, hobbies, family information, cultural information, etc.) on the front. Then they draw a self-portrait and write their name on the inside. After the cards are posted on the bulletin board, classmates try to guess who is who from the information on the front of the card. For older students, you may wish to invite them to offer a little-known fact about themselves or play two truths and a lie.

Students come to know one another through these identity and confidence-building activities. As they do, it is important that classmates receive information shared in an affirming and welcoming manner.





Day nine – critical and creative thinking (executive functioning)

Every day in classrooms, educators establish routines, support learning and growth, and help students to practice skills that help them to plan, focus, retain instruction, and multitask. We know that these skills are further developed and enhanced through repeated practice (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2017). When we introduce these skills early in the school year, explicitly describing how they can be supportive to learning and to managing task demands, students can begin the year with tools that can help to set them up for success.

Critical thinking skills are also helpful for reflection and analysis. Students can benefit from strategies for considering the events of the past few years – the pandemic, world events, societal injustices – and from supportive dialogue that can help them to process all that has happened.

[Hear from some Ontario students about this social-emotional learning skill.](#)



Here are some ideas for helping students to learn and practice skills related to critical and creative thinking (adapt to your students' developmental level).

[Stop, think, go](#) – This activity helps to develop problem-solving skills, using traffic lights as a guide (1. Red – stop – what is the problem? 2. Yellow – think, slow down, proceed with caution, brainstorm possible solutions. Think about what might happen for each of your possible solutions 3. Green – go, try it out. Post the visual as a class reminder and make use of the practice as often as opportunity arises.)

[Keeping track](#) – This activity helps students to remember that when they develop organizational skills, they are better able to keep track of information and materials, especially the things they need every day (homework, notebooks, keys, phone, sports equipment, etc.).

[Goals for the year](#) – Have students identify three big goals for themselves for the coming school year (e.g., get a B in math, try out for a sports team, get to know Ruby better, etc.). Help them to notice that these big goals might seem a long way off. Invite them to choose one of the goals and develop a set of sub-goals that are smaller and easier to achieve (e.g., what is one small thing you could do over the next week that would bring you a little closer to your goal?).

[Memory games](#) – Memory and concentration can be practiced as part of your back-to-school routine. Memory matching games with pictures or cards, or progressive list games (I went shopping and bought... an alligator...a box...a candy cane...a dish towel...etc.), can be a fun way to get students back into the swing of working their memory skills.

For older students, you might want to have them apply their critical thinking skills to discussions related to current events. Be mindful that current events may be sensitive for some students, and they may not wish to be reminded of things happening in the world at this time. Offer a range of ways of participating and reflecting on events. Consider your students carefully when selecting topics so that no one feels centred out during class dialogue. Use small group formats to help to ensure conversations are safe for everyone. For additional guidance on how best to engage in supportive conversations following challenging world events check out this [info sheet](#).





Day 10 – build your toolkit

Welcome to day 10. You and your students are starting to get to know one another, and you have introduced some skills to help them to manage the uncertainties of the school year. You have also set a positive tone for a mentally healthy learning environment – one where students know they matter and belong, engage in positive interactions with one another, and are starting to settle into school routines again.

It can be helpful to remind students about the ideas you introduced as part of this resource. You might also suggest that they create a toolkit of ideas and strategies that can help them to manage things during this unusual time. They could create a physical or online toolkit where they list the coping strategies that they liked the best and can use when they feel anxious (e.g., breathing techniques, visualization). Or they could place any journaling or drawing that they did to remind themselves of their strengths and identity.

In addition to having more social emotional skills to help with coping with uncertainties and stress, students may also benefit from understanding more about their mental health. For elementary students, you may wish to review the health and physical education mental health literacy lesson plans. For secondary students, MH LIT Student Mental Health in Action includes four modules that are designed to build knowledge about mental health. If your students have not engaged with this material in another class, it could be a helpful series of lessons to assist them in their understanding about their own mental health, and how to care for it. These lesson plans can be found on the [SMH-ON website](#).

Share with students the importance of asking for help along the way. Seeking support is an essential skill for learning and achievement. Consider the following questions for your classroom discussion:

- Where can you go to get support (help) at school?
- Who are the people you can talk to?
- What might be some reasons for asking an adult to help instead of a friend? (And vice versa.)
- What does support look like to you?
- How would a teacher show you support? How would a friend? A family member?
- What supports are available in your community? (For example, Kids Help Phone, local resources.)

Here are some activities to support the skill of help-seeking.

Ask three, then me – This activity helps students to understand the importance of asking questions and asking for help.

Identifying helpers – Invite students to consider building a list of supportive people that they can go to when they have concerns. This may include trusted friends and family members, as well as more formal community supports.

Read [Ruby Finds a Worry by Tom Percival \(available in French\)](#), a story about a young girl who discovers she has a worry and so do others. You can invite students to talk about who they could share their worries with.






A final note

Thank you for considering the ideas in this *First 10 Days* guide. As noted at the start, these are just jumping off points and we recognize that the beginning of school may look very different for you and your class than imagined here. We are confident that you will use your creativity and professional judgement to adapt these and other activities, to create a welcoming and inclusive space for learning during this time of challenge, change, and hope.

Thank you for all that you do for students. Remember to engage in practices that support your own wellness, and to reach out for assistance if you need support in creating and sustaining mentally healthy classroom spaces. Every board has a Mental Health Leader who can direct you, or your school principal, to student supports and services.

To learn more about mental health at school, consider accessing the [MH LIT course](#) for educators on the VLE.

Be well.



Visit the [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) to help young people look out for themselves and each other. Please share widely.



[Kids Help Phone](#)
1-800-668-6868
or text "CONNECT" to 686868
for support 24/7

www.smho-smso.ca

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