

ARKANSAS READY TO LEARN

# HELPING STUDENTS COPE

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Students may have a harder time coming back to school this year than usual. While they may look forward to seeing friends and returning to a regular routine, they may also be coping with significant stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers will need strategies to support their students' social-emotional needs as they transition back to the classroom.



This guide was written and assembled by a team of medical, behavioral health, and education experts from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Arkansas Children's, the Arkansas Department of Health, the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, and our partners. The goal of the guide is to bring together good health information. This information includes the latest scientific advice, guidelines, and best practices. Every school is different. This guide can help school officials, educators, and families plan for in-person learning. We want you to have the best information you may need to make good decisions for your school, your family, and your community.

# STAYING HEALTHY, FEELING SAFE

Teachers and students are likely to return to school this year feeling a significant amount of stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This stress is not only from immediate concerns about safe return to school but also built-up stress and anxiety that adults and children have experienced over the past several months. These kinds of stressors can build up over time and have serious negative effects on your students' behavior and how they learn and grow.

As we make plans for keeping students healthy, such as handwashing and wearing masks, we must also find ways to help students feel emotionally safe. This kind of support is important to help them regulate their behavior and focus on learning.

Although COVID-19 is new, stress and trauma are not. This guide is intended to help you identify signs of traumatic stress in your students and support your students with developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed strategies.

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## COVID-19, Childhood Stress, and Trauma-Informed Care

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our daily routines, limited our usual ways of connecting with others, and threatened financial security for many families. Added stress and loss of emotional support systems take their toll over time on adults, but perhaps especially on children. As your students return to school this fall, you must remember that they are carrying the stress of the past several months with them. Even if they cannot fully understand what the adults in their life have experienced, they are still affected by family hardship. Challenges in finding regular childcare and distance from friends or family members may have taken away important emotional support systems. Sensing adult fear and uncertainty can lead to further stress in children.

Experiencing stressful events is an unavoidable part of life. All of our bodies have built-in alarm systems to help us recognize and respond to dangers around us. In the moment, your body's alarm system activates a response to either approach or fight, flee/avoid, or freeze. After the threat goes away, your body shuts off this alarm system and you can go on with your day. Your students, especially those that are younger, will need you and other adults to help them calm down. When you are also under stress it may be harder for you to provide the comfort and reassurance that your students need.

Trauma-informed care is a way to understand and respond to the needs of children who have experienced major stress. It means using proven, developmentally-appropriate strategies to help your students feel safe and be able to adapt to the negative effects of stress. You can use trusted trauma-informed principles and social-emotional skills to support your students and colleagues in the midst of this transition.

This guide outlines some of those strategies and may help you create a classroom that is responsive to children's social and emotional needs during COVID-19. We hope that it will:

- Help you identify signs of traumatic stress in your students
- Empower you with strategies to build a COVID-19-responsive classroom
- Provide you with information on how to recognize if a student needs more help



## Recognize Signs of Trauma in Your Students

When your students have stressful life events they may have emotional, behavioral, learning, and social challenges. Recognizing common trauma responses in your students will help you choose sensitive and effective strategies to support them. The good news is that the strongest predictor of resilience in the face of trauma is the presence of consistent, responsive, supportive adults, like teachers and caregivers. Developing your knowledge and skills related to trauma-informed practices can make a strong positive impact on how your students cope with uncertainty.

### Signs of Trauma

- Changes to sleeping or eating habits
- Seeming sad, worried or frustrated all the time
- Rapid changes to mood and behavior from difficulties with self-regulation
- Behavioral problems, getting frustrated easily and acting out



#### EARLY CHILDHOOD

More frequent or more intense temper tantrums  
More difficulty calming down when upset or using self-soothing skills  
General irritability or fussiness  
Showing more separation anxiety than normal  
Loss of previously learned skills, acting like a younger child



#### MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Asking lots of questions, sometimes the same ones over and over  
Talking about worries, especially about what might happen to people that they care about  
Having a harder time paying attention, seeming to be occupied with their own thoughts  
Having a harder time following the rules



#### ADOLESCENCE

Withdrawing from others, feeling depressed & lonely  
Seeming less interested in activities they normally enjoy  
Challenging authority figures  
Engaging in more risky behavior (such as self-harm, substance abuse, or risky sexual behavior).

## How to Build a Trauma-Responsive Classroom

Building a COVID-19-responsive classroom relies on some trauma-informed principles. You may have learned these in some of your training on ways to support young children's social and emotional development. Below, we highlight some core strategies that will help you build the foundation for a trauma-responsive classroom.

### Be a Calm Caregiver

The first step in building a COVID-19-responsive classroom is to remember that your students will take their cues from the adults around them. It is not only what we do, but how we do it, that can make the difference in the effectiveness of our tools. You must model what you hope to see from your students.

#### KEEP YOUR COOL

Remember your anxiety is contagious. You have to calm yourself first.

Identify your own feelings and engage in regular brief relaxation. For example, you could take a few deep breaths.

Pay attention to your emotional state and engage in self-care activities. See the resources at the end of this guide.

Seek professional help if needed. You may find help through your school's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or your doctor.

#### STAY FLEXIBLE

Guidance will likely change as we learn more about COVID-19.

Expect that we will have to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

Avoid making promises to your students that are not realistic. Instead, focus on what you can control. For example, you could say, "I don't know if we'll all be in the classroom for the whole year, but I will do my best to share information with you as I learn it."

#### SEE THROUGH A TRAUMA LENS

Think "what happened or is happening to you?" instead of "what is wrong with you?"

Remember that many of your students (and staff) are experiencing this pandemic on top of other prior trauma.

See frustrating behaviors as possible trauma symptoms.



## Build Emotional Safety

Children thrive on schedules, routines, consistency, and predictability. It helps them understand and cope with their environments. For children with experiences of trauma, predictability can enhance feelings of emotional safety. This is especially relevant during transitions, such as coming back to school or shifting to a virtual learning platform. You must also be sure that you do not bring your adult fears and worries into the classroom.

### CREATE PREDICTABILITY

Teach your students about the schedules and routines of the class.

Consider adding visual or auditory cues to help your students through transitions. For example, you could create a visual schedule or make a certain noise to give a 5-minute warning before the next transition. Young children will need more visual cues and repetition.

Explain and proactively remind your students of rules and expectations.

Discuss changes to the routine (such as drills, field trips) in advance.

Normalize and teach COVID-19 specific routines (such as handwashing, masks).

### BUILD IN CHOICE

Remember, the world can feel unpredictable and out of control for your students because adults make the decisions. When you can do so safely, let students make some choices.

Be clear about what is fixed and inflexible, and what is open to choice.

Remind your students that the rules are there to keep us all safe.

For example:

- For younger students, offer activity choices during free time.
- For older students, offer flexibility in how they engage in certain activities (silently reading versus reading aloud).

### WATCH YOUR WORDS

Remember that children are expert observers of the adults around them, particularly in times they feel unsafe or uncertain. They will watch what you say and how you say it.

Limit adult conversations about COVID-19 topics in front of your students. Avoid sharing your grown-up fears and worries with your students.

If you must have a serious adult conversation in front of your students, use a calm tone, keep a relaxed body posture, and use language they can understand.



## Connect with Your Students

When you build a positive relationship with your students, it can foster self-esteem, promote resilience in their response to trauma, build trust, and make it more likely they will respond well to the strategies you implement.

### PRAISE POSITIVE BEHAVIORS

Remember that your students tend to do more of the behaviors that receive your attention.

Notice when they are 'on task' and comment on the things you would like to see them doing more frequently. For example, "Wow, I appreciate how you have kept plugging away at that worksheet!"

Remember to praise effort, and not just outcomes.

### SHOW YOU CARE

Greet your students each day as they enter the classroom. Make sure they see how excited you are to be with them.

Try to find time to individually connect with each student if only for a moment.

Use open-ended questions to learn about their life and interests.

Use empathetic listening and show concern when their day is hard.

Think about how you can use these relationship-building strategies virtually if needed.

### CONNECT BEFORE YOU CORRECT

Before offering correction, consider connection.

Make deposits into your 'relationship bank' with each of your students (and their caregivers!) through praise and positive attention.

When you must correct:

- Approach a student calmly after they have calmed down
- Label what you see
- Validate the problem
- Emphasize what they did well
- Apologize for any missteps in your approach
- Offer appropriate choices, when possible

Emphasize the importance of the relationship and find extra opportunities to deliver positive attention.



## Teach Your Students How to Cope

Emotional and behavioral concerns will likely be more common and may be more extreme than before. Keep in mind that emotional and behavioral self-regulation are developmental skills that you must teach and practice with your students. If your students are stressed they will have more trouble practicing these skills. When your students do not behave well, it is an opportunity for you to teach and practice emotional self-regulation. If your school has access to a social-skills curriculum you can integrate those lessons into your day and find ways to reinforce new skills through modeling and practice. If you have not had previous training on teaching social-emotional skills, the tips in the table can get you started. For more training opportunities, see the resources section at the back of this document.

### BUILD EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Help your students identify their emotions and express how they are feeling in words as a step to building self-regulation.

Label and validate feelings.

Use books and pictures to explore 'feeling words' with young children.

Consider implementing daily check-ins with your students about how they are feeling.

### TEACH CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Help your students find useful ways to solve conflicts in the classroom by picking a specific problem-solving approach to teach.

Use classroom conflicts between your students as an opportunity to teach and practice problem-solving skills.

Remember your students will need a great deal of practice to demonstrate these skills on their own.

### BUILD COPING SKILLS

Greet your students each day as they enter the classroom.

Teach and model ways to cope with overwhelming emotions.

Teach and practice deep breathing, 'turtle' techniques and other ways of calming down.

Give your students time to practice these skills when they are not upset.



## Partner with Caregivers

Partnerships with students' caregivers is important to educational success. Their involvement has always mattered, but the current crisis has made it more important to communicate and partner with your students' caregivers. With children switching between school and home, there are 3 key actions you can take to make a successful partnership.

### COMMUNICATE

Communicate with caregivers often about COVID-19 procedures and how the school is keeping students safe.

Be transparent about the unknowns and the fact that things may change.

Share specific information about how you are talking to your students about COVID-19 and helping them cope so their caregivers can reinforce this at home.

Share specific information with caregivers often about how their child is doing. This is especially important the first few months of school.

### ENGAGE

Encourage caregivers to share information with staff about how this crisis has affected them. For example, to let staff know about changes at home such as a job loss.

Invite discussions about how the school can help.

Think about the barriers that may limit the ability of a family to visit with you often (such as work schedules, language barriers, transportation) and make plans to work around those barriers.

### SHARE RESOURCES

Educate caregivers about the social-emotional teaching strategies you are using and encourage them to practice at home.

Share information on topics such as the importance of limiting children's exposure to disturbing media coverage of the pandemic.

Share information about stress and coping and where to seek help.



## Talk with Your Students about COVID-19

Part of helping students cope with stress or worry is to talk with them about what is happening. Sometimes adults worry that bringing up a potentially traumatic event will make it worse, when in fact, students need a safe space to talk. Here are some general tips for talking about COVID-19 or related stressors.

### Ask

- Ask what they know about COVID-19 and how they are feeling.
- Follow their lead - answer their questions but do not “force” them to talk with you.

### Offer Consistent Message

- Let caregivers know how you plan to talk about COVID-19 at school so that they can do the same at home.
- Pay attention to what students may hear on TV, online, or from adult conversations. Try to limit their exposure to media and stressful adult conversations.

### Reassure

- Let your students know that it is ok for them to be upset, and to talk about their feelings.
- Assure your students that you care.
- Focus on steps adults are taking to keep them safe.

When your students ask about COVID-19, your answers should be truthful and age-appropriate. Young children need short, simple explanations. Older children can understand more detailed information and may ask about social or political issues related to the pandemic. Here are some tips for talking with your students of different ages.



### EARLY CHILDHOOD

Use short, simple explanations. Do not share more details than they ask about.

Focus on habits (such as eating healthy foods, washing your hands, sneezing into your elbow,) that keep us healthy.

Focus on comfort and connection. Reassure your students that adults are working hard to keep them safe.



### MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Ask about what they have seen or heard about COVID-19. Ask caregivers about how they talk about these topics at home.

Remind them that if they do get sick, it does not mean they have COVID-19.

Put news stories in context. Talk about what “rare” and “common” mean.

Give them specific things to do so they feel more in control (such as wearing masks, washing hands).

Let them know that it is ok to be worried. Share things that help make you feel better when you are stressed.



### ADOLESCENCE

Help teenagers find reliable sources of information. Talk about how some stories on the internet may be based on rumor and not facts.

Frame safety measures as everyone’s responsibility and talk about other ways they can help.

Remind them that scientists are working to develop a vaccine and that we have found ways to solve big problems before.

Encourage teenagers to find appropriate ways to talk about COVID-19 in, and out, of school. Remind them that blaming people or organizations for the pandemic is not helpful. Ask them to avoid sharing rumors.

## Recognize and Respond to Additional Needs

### Recognize Risk and Disparities

Rates of childhood poverty are higher in Arkansas than the national average, as are rates of other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Other ACEs include things like seeing violence at home or in the community, having a family member with mental illness, and having a family member in jail. Even before COVID-19, these children had more stress and were at higher risk of serious academic and behavioral problems. These students and their families are also among those hardest hit by the economic effects of COVID-19. For many families, pre-existing economic and social challenges have become even greater. And, inequities have become more visible in light of the pandemic's disproportionate effects on communities of color and those of low socioeconomic status (SES).

### Recognize and Reflect on Disparities

Remember that:

- COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities in Arkansas.
- Families who have experienced other stressful life events may be at higher risk for negative impacts from COVID-19.
- Students who live in poverty may experience food insecurity, disrupted sleep patterns and higher rates of mental illness. They are in need of a predictable, supportive school environment.

Ensure that resources are tailored to specific languages for families who speak a language other than English at home.

Reflect on statements such as "We understand that we were/are all in the same storm, but not the same boat." Remember that your situation is likely different from that of many of your students.

### Take Extra Steps to Help Students Who Need More

Focus on equity (giving all students what they need) as opposed to equality (giving every student the same thing).

Keep offering social and other support programs at schools. These students may rely on things like after-school care and free meals and will suffer more if you cut back on these services.

Provide enough resources for family engagement and homeless education programs.



## Recognize Additional Need for Mental Health Supports

Building a COVID-responsive classroom will help all of your students cope better, but even with these supports, some of your students may need more help.

### Carefully Observe Students

Watch for changes or difficulties in how a student is doing academically or socially.

Look for patterns of difficulty, rather than one-time or short-lived changes.

Watch for major changes to emotions, mood, or behavior.

Notice when a student keeps struggling even though you have made changes for them in the classroom.

### Check in with Caregivers

Note concerns you have when you observe family members:

- High stress levels in parents
- Parents becoming more forgetful or inconsistent
- Parents with a 'short fuse'

Pay attention to family-level burdens that can go along with COVID-19 (such as job loss, poor access to health care, or increasing mental health challenges).

Visit with parents. Ask them how things are going. Offer resources as needed. Then, check in often to see what other help caregivers may need.



ANGER



DEPRESSION

PERSONAL  
IDENTITYPROBLEMS  
WITH PARENTS

UNDERACHIEVEMENT



INSECURITY



ALOOFNESS



LONELINESS



ILLUSIONS



BAD HABITS

FORSAKEN  
PREVIOUS  
INTERESTS

FEAR

## Connect Families with Community Services

Once you recognize that a child or family needs additional help, you will need to know how to connect them with available support systems. It is important to familiarize yourself with programs in your community and know who can help you connect families to needed services.

### Identify a “Go-To” Team at Your School

Work with your school team to identify a person or group of people that can help families find services.

Make sure you know the right way to make referrals. Remember that all school staff, including office staff, bus drivers, and learning aids could identify a student need, and all need to know how to get them help.

Try to limit the amount of people communicating with a family about a single concern. The parent will feel less overwhelmed if your response is organized.

### Become Aware of Community Resources

Explore community organizations (including faith-based organizations) that are providing relief for families impacted by COVID-19. Use the list at the back of this guide.

Make sure referral lists are updated and that all staff who should make referrals know where to find them.

Understand how to access mental health services in your area. Be sure your referral list includes community mental health agencies that provide evidence-based treatments for trauma.

### Recognize Your Role

Ensure that all school staff know their role in identifying needs and making referrals.

Be patient with yourself. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and overburdened when you need to do things outside of your comfort zone.

Remember that your job is to identify problems and connect your students to experts who can address them. You are not expected to know everything a student needs. Instead, your job is to help a family realize when additional needs arise.



## Support Students with Disabilities

Students with developmental delays and disabilities will need more help with the transition back to school. They may be more likely to regress in developmental skills and behavior. Limited mobility, sensory processing differences and other unique circumstances may make it difficult for these students to participate in recommended safety practices.

Every student with a disability is entitled to a free and appropriate education, including the special education services outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP), even during this challenging time. No child should be excluded from the school setting based on their inability to comply with a specific safety practice. Instead, these practices should be adapted, when necessary, to meet the needs of the individual student.

### Individualize

Remember there is no “one size fits all” approach for students with disabilities.

Focus on problem-solving through creative solutions. For example, you may need to pay extra attention to small group cohorts and room arrangement (including plexiglass shields) to lower the risk of transmission among students who cannot tolerate wearing masks.

### Adapt

Remember to use the student’s mental age, not their actual age. For example, for a 10-year old that functions as a 5-year old, use the early childhood strategies in this document.

### Intensify

Know that you may also have to increase the intensity of the recommended strategy. For example, some students with developmental disorders have trouble with any disruption of their normal day. Therefore, they will need more intense supports to adapt to changes in routine. Use visual schedules, visual routines (such as steps to handwashing) and social stories more frequently. Try to create calming sensory environments.



## ADDITIONAL TOOLS & RESOURCES

### Childhood Trauma

[About Child Trauma](#) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, NCTSN)  
[Effects of Trauma and Resilience](#) (NCTSN)

### Trauma Informed Tools for Teachers

[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child\\_trauma\\_toolkit\\_educators.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf) (NCTSN)

### Trauma Informed Strategies for Early Learning Environments (UAMS)

<https://familymedicine.uams.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2020/06/Coping-with-Covid-Final.pdf>

### Talking to Children about COVID

[Helping Children Cope](#) (CDC)  
[How teachers can talk to children about coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#) (UNICEF)  
[Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease 2019](#) (CDC)

### Tip sheets for educators on self care:

[SELF CARE for Educators](#) (NCTSN)  
[Tips for Helping School-Age Children After Disasters](#) (NCTSN)  
<https://www.transform.ar.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NewDirections.pdf> (ADE Employee Assistance)

### Schedules & Routines

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb3.pdf>

### Social & Emotional Skill Building

[CSEFEL: Teaching Your Child to Identify and Express Emotions](#)  
[CECMHC | Ideas for Teaching Children about Emotions](#)  
[Helping Young Children Control Anger and Handle Disappointment](#)  
[Self-Regulation Skills: Breathing Strategies](#)  
[Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Practice Brief](#)  
[Activity: Teaching Problem Solving](#)  
[Problem Solving in the Classroom](#)

### Trauma-Informed Mental Health Resources in Arkansas

[Trauma Treatments](#) (ARBEST)

### Family Support Services

[Community Resources | Goodwill Arkansas | Help Yourself Directory Guide](#)  
[COVID-19 Resources for Individuals and Families | USDA-FNS](#)

### Resources for students with special needs:

[UAMS Community-Based Autism Liaison and Treatment Project \(CoBALT\)](#)  
[Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak, March 20](#) (US Dept. of Education)

### Resources for students experiencing homelessness

[Considerations in Serving Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Information](#)  
[Supporting Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness during the COVID Outbreak](#)

# Arkansas Ready to Learn/K-12 Safe School Reopening Task Force

This guide was developed by the Behavioral Health Guideline Subcommittee of the Arkansas Ready to Learn/K-12 Safe School Reopening Task Force. It is intended to be used alongside the Arkansas Ready to Learn Healthy School Guide.

## Ready for School Resource Call Center

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has established a Ready for School Resource Call Center. The purpose of the call center is to provide Arkansans with information and resources regarding the reopening of schools.

## The Ready for School Resource Help Line

**1-833-353-6050**

The Help Line is open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.  
Monday through Friday.  
Bilingual support is available.

The Help Line is made possible through a partnership between the Arkansas Department of Education and:  
UAMS, Arkansas Department of Health, Arkansas Children's, Republic of the Marshall Islands Consulate, and Arkansas Bilingual Resource Network

## ADH/ADE COVID-19 Hotline

The Arkansas Department of Health and Arkansas Department of Education also have a hotline that is available for school districts and school questions about: students or staff who may have COVID-19; how to isolate students or staff so they don't spread the virus if they have it; and how to quarantine people who may be close contacts to students or staff who may have COVID-19. The number is:

**1-833-504-0155**

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This guide is for informational and educational purposes only. It should not be used as a replacement for medical or legal advice. Schools and employers are solely responsible for complying with all applicable legal requirements and making decisions regarding their operations, students, and employees based upon their individual circumstances. This guide is not intended as a substitute for following applicable federal, state, or local laws, regulations, or guidelines. The authors are not responsible for any errors, omissions, or actions taken in reliance on or from use of this information.

Adherence to any recommendations included in this guide will not ensure successful results in every situation. Furthermore, the recommendations contained in this Playbook should not be interpreted as setting a standard of care, or be deemed inclusive of all proper methods of operations. There is no guarantee that following all of these recommendations will prevent transmission of COVID-19.