



Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Connectedness During Remote Learning

The California Department of Education's Project Cal-Well is designed to raise awareness of student mental health and help expand access to school- and community-based mental health services for youth, families, and school communities. Visit the [Project Cal-Well](#) website for additional information and resources.

As the global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in remote learning well into the 2020/21 school year, educators have gotten creative in how they help students feel connected. "Connectedness" refers broadly to having relationships with others who can understand and support you. Particularly during a prolonged crisis, experiencing positive relationships has important and long-lasting academic, social, and emotional benefits for students.¹

During this time of remote learning, many students are missing connecting with their friends, peers, and trusted adults. With cameras off at times, faces hidden behind masks, and fewer opportunities to interact than in brick-and-mortar schools, setting aside time and being purposeful in fostering a sense of connection are particularly important. As the disruption to the daily lives of families and

the routines of school systems continues, connectedness is especially important for promoting social and emotional wellness.

This brief focuses on feasible and flexible classroom strategies that K–12 educators can use to connect with students and to foster a sense of community within their virtual classrooms. The following sections provide tips and resources to help educators:

1 Wentzel, K. R. (2017). Peer relationships, motivation, and academic performance at school. In A. J. Elliot, C. S. Dweck, & D. S. Yeager (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation: Theory and application* (pp. 586–603). Guilford Press.

- Promote students’ feelings of being welcomed as part of a community
- Foster peer-to-peer connections and relationships through classroom activities and independent assignments
- Regularly check in with students about their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing
- Demonstrate flexibility, understanding, and willingness to communicate with students and their families

Promote students’ feelings of being welcomed as part of a community

Create a responsive environment in which students feel a sense of belonging and mutual respect among their classmates.

To communicate your care and attention, greet each student personally and provide positive, explicit feedback throughout the class period or day. If you teach large groups and/or multiple groups of students, consider keeping notes on your engagement with individual students to ensure that you are connecting regularly with all students. You can use emojis and other [socially distant positive greetings](#).

Create a daily video greeting for your students, particularly if you won’t see your students every day. Even a [prerecorded video](#) that gives students a chance to see their teacher every day can provide a sense of connection.

Provide a trauma-informed virtual environment that is responsive to students’ lives. [Trauma-informed distance learning strategies](#) can help students develop consistent, positive relationships with teachers and their peers. You can also [adapt a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports \(PBIS\) framework to virtual environments](#) in order to make learning safe, predictable, and positive for all students.

Work with other school staff members to ensure that every student has an adult connection at school. You can come together virtually with colleagues to identify students who are not well-connected and to find ways to connect these students with adult mentors.

Foster peer-to-peer connections and relationships through classroom activities and independent assignments

Create conditions that enable students to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with one another during remote instruction.

Build time into the school day for students to check in with one another, share their experiences, and have fun. Find ways to help students connect with one another — whether during a [morning meeting](#), after a specific subject, or at the end of the day. You might use prompts that can be simple, open-ended questions. Ask your students to share what they learned about themselves, what they found challenging, or what they enjoyed during the school day. You might try using the [three CASEL signature practices](#): Welcoming/Inclusion Activities, Engaging Strategies, and Optimistic Closure.

Encourage students to work together and connect during and outside of class time. Create assignments that require students to work together during class time, in breakout rooms, or outside of class time, through discussion boards. If students will need to [work together outside of designated class times](#), allow them to develop a plan for how they will connect (e.g., phone, virtual platform), and take into account that many families are managing multiple schedules, often with limited resources (e.g., devices). Prompt students to share what has worked well for connecting outside of school and to support one another in solving any problems.

Create a buddy system that enables students to check in with one another. In virtual learning environments, you can pair students up and ask them to check in with one another once per week to help them develop relationships with classmates. You might assign conversation topics and/or change the pairings every few weeks or so.

Regularly check in with students about their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing

Integrate norms and rituals into your classroom routines to provide opportunities for students to reflect on and share about their own experiences, feelings, and overall wellbeing.

Establish routines for checking in on students and identifying how they are feeling. Developing emotional skills for self-regulation and supporting others, especially during this time of prolonged stress, starts with identifying and recognizing one's own emotions and those of others. Visual aids can help students and adults identify and articulate their feelings. Identifying feelings should be linked to understanding and identifying strategies to help manage feelings. You can use the [Feelings Thermometer](#), [Mood Meter](#), or [Emotion Wheel](#) to help students check in on their feelings.

Incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies into the virtual classroom on a daily basis. Try some [short, adaptable SEL lessons](#) to help students manage their emotions, develop relationships, and make responsible decisions to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. Explore [SEL learning opportunities](#) that can be incorporated into the school day in a variety of ways.

For students experiencing negative emotions, be prepared to respond by listening, expressing that you care, validating their feelings, staying

calm, and answering questions truthfully. When challenging emotions arise, helpful tools can include [using de-escalating language](#) and ["I" messages](#). If you have serious concerns (e.g., self-harm or other safety concerns related to a student's wellbeing), follow your school's procedure for seeking guidance or making a referral to a school counselor, social worker, or psychologist.

Demonstrate flexibility, understanding, and willingness to communicate with students and their families

Without the typical channels for in-person interaction, finding ways to convey your willingness to connect with students and families in ways that are appropriate to them is important.

Be understanding of your students and their families, acknowledge their effort, and frequently communicate appreciation of them. Students and families are managing many challenging home situations, which may impact how they engage in remote learning and connect with others. Families are learning how to support remote instruction, as well as their work and family responsibilities, with little or no additional supports. [Connect with parents by phone](#), texts, and/or friendly emails to reassure parents that teachers are available to support the entire family.

Provide multiple ways for students and parents to get in touch with you, and periodically remind them of these ways. You may want to set virtual classroom hours for students and parents. [Virtual classroom hours](#) can provide a way to check in on students' emotional wellbeing as well as their academics. Provide your email and/or phone number, and set expectations for a reasonable amount of time in which you will respond (e.g., 24 hours). Survey students and families to identify their preferred methods of communication.

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