

COVID-19

Suggestions for Safe Digital Connections with Vulnerable/High- Risk Students

During this pandemic and as we practice physical distancing, it's more important now than ever that we ensure strong connections with our students. Relationships between adults and students are the most important factor in promoting safe, healthy, and caring school communities. Schools and school districts should continuously be developing innovative strategies to make every student feel valued, respected, safe, wanted and connected during this unprecedented time. For some of our students:

School connectedness is the most important protective factor in a young person's life.

It is critical that all school staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators and other staff, be prepared to serve as stable foundations that students can lean on for support and guidance. Whatever the traumatic event, there are some universal factors we must always consider when it comes to how kids perceive events. The next thing to consider is how those perceptions may impact their reactions and behaviour.

An important thing to remember at this time is that children **fear** many things. However, illness, going to the doctor/hospital themselves, the illness or death of a parent/loved one, are among the top of those fears. Above all else, this is an opportunity for lots of quality time and to enhance the development of healthy connections.

How we can all help our students:

- The most important thing a parent/adult/teacher can do is to remain calm themselves. Children will mirror the reactions of adults. So, pay attention to what you say and do. They will pick up on changes in the tone, volume and cadence of your voice.
- Answer their questions, even if they are repetitive and don't make sense to you, in a way that is direct and calm.
- Give children the facts in a developmentally appropriate way. If you do not, they will imagine something on their own that may be far worse than what the crisis really is. Try not to engage in gossip or conversations sparked by social media panic.

During a pandemic, remember these responses:

"Yes, we do need to be careful about washing our hands and staying away from others who may be sick."

"The likelihood of one of us getting the virus is not high – but if we do, doctors will take care of us."

[Concerning COVID-19] "It seems scary, but it is very rare to die from this virus."

"It is okay and normal to be worried, scared or frightened about this—of course you are. We all are, and that is why we are doing everything we can to keep you safe."

The Traumatic Impact of School Cancellation

Above and beyond the panic and trauma that comes from a pandemic, we're facing an undetermined amount of time when school, and consequently the only structure and sense/place of safety for many kids are taken away. For many, school provides safety, food, routine, socialization, connections and stimulations. Any change from routine can be a stressor for all individuals.

What can we do to help students feel safe during this time?

It really depends on what communication channels you have available with your students. Anything you can do to ensure a caring and supportive connection to your students while they are at home can be what they need in a time of uncertainty. When it's time to return to school, teachers must keep in mind that this shift back to the school routine can be as difficult for some as the cancellation was for others. Every child is different in their reactions to a change of schedule.

What the world is enduring right now is of universal concern and will be stressful for even non-traumatized parents/children. For children and parents who already experience ongoing toxic stress, this will be an additional stressor on their already anxious minds/bodies. Attempt to be strategic in the identification of the staff members to maintain healthy and caring connections with identified students. **Remember, the most important thing we can do for our kids is to simply be that caring adult who is there to support and comfort them.**

In addition to the digital recommendations below encourage students to document their thoughts, perspectives and activities over the next several weeks. The format may be digital, handwritten, and include photographs, drawings and journal entries. This endeavour will provide knowledge and understanding gained from this experience in the years to come.

Purposes of Asynchronous and Synchronous Connections:

- Meeting to touch base with students regarding their wellbeing.
- Holding a group meeting with students to discuss perspectives and current events.
 - Ask students what they have been observing.
 - What are their current concerns?
 - What joys are they experiencing?
- Organize problem-solving conversations.
- Using these ideas or coming up with your own creative projects or challenges that would encourage students and recognize their value as positive role models in these projects.

Synchronous Connections

- Phone Call
 - Using WhatsApp or Google Calls to make free calls to your students without disclosing your personal phone number
- Video Conference Calls
 - Using Zoom, Meet, Teams, or Bluejeans

*** see attached suggestions to not be ZoomBombed provided by our colleagues at NYIT – New York Institute of Technology

- Online Games
 - Trickster – play card games with integrated video conferencing
 - NHL, FIFA, NBA Xbox Challenge Play – organize round-robin for students
 - Bamboozle – integrate games into your video conference call
 - Let students know that you need *their* advice (creates a sense of importance and belonging).
 - Pose a current problem/issue and use time to generate possible solutions (which may catalyze a project or two towards social good).
- Integrate online polls to conversations.
 - Using Zoom built-in polls, Polleverywhere, Google Forms, MS Surveys, etc.
 - Note that the student perspective is not often represented in the media; consider submitting an article or video to the local news (i.e. accomplish something together).

Asynchronous Connections

- Direct Messages
 - Via Snapchat, Instagram, or Facebook from a “staff” account (**not personal account**).
 - Textplus to make free texts to your students without disclosing your personal phone number.
- Build challenges to engage the mind and foster relationship
 - TikTok kind words challenge
 - Something funny/engaging
 - Encourage students to promote positive thinking or connections during this time of isolation on their own social media platforms
 - Provide outline/assignment for students to invest in their future – begin building a portfolio, appreciative inquiry family history project, become founders of an online social group/forum moderator/etc.
 - Video production project for something that can be showcased on school website or when school comes back together – such as, “How I learned to become creative during COVID-19”, etc.

Other Connection Resources & Ideas

- Hold Drop-In Hours
 - Let your students know when they can “drop-in” to a Zoom call to talk, ask a question, tell a joke, or just see you.
- Staff can send out lighthearted emails asking if everyone is okay or need anything with music or video attachments
 - This shows the students how much you care on a personal level and will allow them to form a sense of trust and connectedness



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Our school communities have shown incredible resilience, leadership and understanding during a challenging and stressful time. Their patience and adaptability in the midst of this crisis are an example to all of us. The concern for students, staff and for society in general is inspirational.

At a time when our actions are heightening the physical separation between us, the persistent strength of our school communities is more evident than ever.

Warm Regards,
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