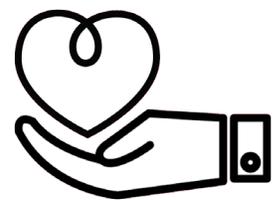


## INTRODUCTION

Like any other teaching practice, creating a classroom culture where students and teachers trust each other takes time and commitment. In order to help build that kind of classroom culture, the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has developed some strategies for teachers to help provide students with emotional and academic support, focus on creating healthy group dynamics, and extend learning in ways that engage students.

## HOW TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Students benefit from positive relationships with trusted adults, which can take time and skill to develop. Some people believe that these relationships just happen naturally; and with some students, perhaps they do, however, often teachers need to develop skills to strengthen their interactions with all students. Listed below are some strategies that can be used to build more trusting relationships with students and a classroom climate that encourages and supports students in feeling safe and secure.



- Model trust and respect for all students; if you make a mistake acknowledge it to your students and state your intention to do better in the future.
- Position yourself as a coach and mentor who is there to learn with students, help them learn and learn from them.
  - Make it a point to connect with each and every student. This can be by standing at the door when students arrive or leave and greeting them or by giving each student an individual greeting while taking attendance or more formally by meeting or conferencing with students. One way to do this is by making it your goal to connect with each student for 2 minutes a week.
    - When a student shares in class, validate their contribution. This is different than agreeing with students and helps them understand that you hear what they are saying. For example, if they are in high school and they don't know how to balance a challenging exam schedule and a part-time job or if they are K-8 students and share something stressful you can validate them by saying, "That sounds overwhelming."
    - Paraphrase what students say with a statement like: "So, what I am hearing you say is ..." Then, give students a chance to clarify their ideas if you have misunderstood.
- If a student is having a difficult time responding to a question, give them some time to think and then let them know you'll come back to them. You can build trust in the moment by validating that it can be challenging to respond quickly on the spot by saying something like, "It can be tricky to come up with something in the moment. Would you like a second and then I can come back around?"
  - If a student approaches you with an issue you have a hard time coming up with an answer for, you can let the student know you will get back to them. This also creates a relationship that the student sees extending beyond the classroom.
    - If you are aware that a student has faced issues that are coming up in the lesson, touch base with the student in private before the lesson and see what they might need to feel supported during classes. Challenges from home can overwhelm learning and helping students think through strategies they can use to help them focus on school can help them succeed. Consider referencing the [Focusing Strategies](#) when you are looking for ways to help students focus on school.
    - Create a way for students to privately signal you if they are facing something challenging in their lives that is making it hard for them to participate in class or in the lesson being taught. This could be a note left on your desk before class, a code word, or wink.

- Before class, find out the school policy for reporting concerns about a student's mental health to a school counselor or administrator.

- Have a list of community resources available for students who want more information about a topic that comes up in class or if they want help with challenges they are facing. Distribute these resources to all students or make the resources available in a way that students can easily access without others being aware that they are doing so. That way, if a student expresses their concerns or problems to another student, they will also have the information of how to help their peer.

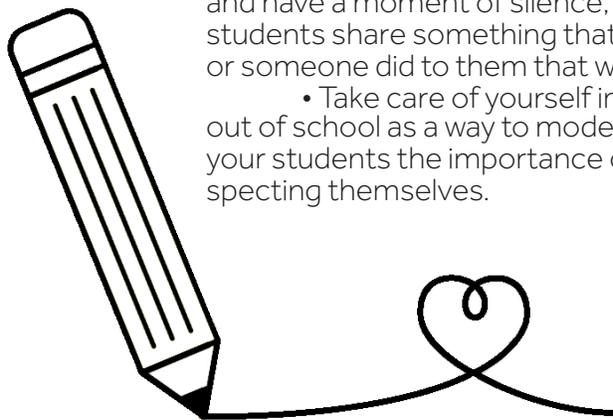
- Help high school students reframe the language they are using when they share a situation (see [Emotional Care Unit](#), Reframing Techniques lesson, pp. 29-35)

- If students mention they are dealing with strong emotions and feelings, you may want to encourage them to meet with a school counselor or another trusted adult.

- Create two ways for students to share concerns with you: privately or anonymously. This can be through email, notes, talking before or after class, etc. Make sure to let students know how to get ahold of you.

- Start each class with a moment to focus on kindness to self and others, such as writing in a journal that focuses on kind things that have happened to them since the last class, practice a breathing exercise for a few minutes, chime a meditation bell and have a moment of silence, have students share something that they or someone did to them that was kind.

- Take care of yourself in and out of school as a way to model to your students the importance of respecting themselves.



## HOW TO PROVIDE ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Classrooms are made up of diverse learners and RAK supports teachers making the RAK material accessible for all learners. This might be done in line with a student's individualized learning plan (IEP) or 504 or by reflecting on their learning needs. In order to support teachers in using their professional judgment in making these decisions, RAK has provided tips to help teachers improve access for their students.

- Be an active part of the planning of a project.
- If a student has a difficult time engaging with a project, make sure they are assigned a task they can handle or consider partnering them with another student.

- Students might benefit from reviewing the [Focusing Strategies](#).

- Write or project the definitions for vocabulary words and/or kindness concepts on the board.

- Write or project all questions and discussion topics on the board ahead of time so students know what to expect and what they should be listening for.

- Encourage students to take notes while they are watching the videos.

- Consider having the students discuss the questions from the lessons together with a partner first and then share with the rest of the group.

- If a lesson seems too long for students or the material seems difficult for your group, divide the lesson into more than one class period.

- Project instructions for games/activities on the board so that students can reference them during the lesson.

- Construct note catchers for students to use during videos or role plays.

- Add journaling time for students to do additional reflection on the material in order to better internalize the concepts. For students who are emergent writers, encourage them to illustrate their journal responses or draw a cartoon.

- For lessons that have numerous opportunities to practice, consider partnering students to complete every other question and then share answers with each other.

- Provide students with time to talk together before completing a written response.

- When appropriate, take time to define words or provide examples for challenging or complex concepts.

## HOW TO CREATE HEALTHIER GROUP DYNAMICS

Creating a healthy classroom environment is not only about the adult's relationships with the students, but also about creating a safe and positive group dynamic where students are kind to each other and have the tools they need to support their peers. This is essential for emotional health and academic achievement, and is particularly important when a class is addressing issues related to social and emotional learning. If students feel safe they are more likely to share their own feelings and support others. To create a healthier group dynamic try the tips listed below.



- Encourage students to think of the classroom as a place that belongs to everyone in the class.
- Allow students to define together the rules of class discussions. (High school students do this in the Emotional Care Unit, SEL and Kindness lesson, pp. 5-10)
- Be intentional about letting students know you want to create a safe place to learn. Be very clear about what kinds of talk or behaviors are not tolerated in the classroom. Create a no fly zone. Never let a student put another down, make fun of them or be discriminating or disrespectful. Let students know you will also be held to these standards.
- At the beginning of the semester, play a few activities that will help students get to know one another.
- When selecting or organizing small groups, be aware of different outcomes of groupings. Making sure every student has a chance to be in a group with every other student in the class minimizes cliques and people always sitting with the same people. Grouping students with friends can help deeper discussion when talking about more sensitive subjects.
- Facilitate discussions and conversations while allowing students to become physically comfortable. Sitting in a circle without barriers (desks, chairs, etc.) between them can help, but also allowing kids to sit on the desks, on the floor or somewhere else can also encourage comfort.

- Create a time during class where everyone who wants to has a chance to speak. Students could gather in a circle and pass a talking stick or an object, which allows each student the opportunity to speak. With hand raising, often the same few students voices are heard disproportionately.
- Post group norms, such as RAK's Kindness Concepts, and refer to them during each class. Have students complete the RAK Student Self-Assessment (elementary, middle or high school) to help them decide what concepts they want to develop.
- Break large group activities into smaller groups to help facilitate sharing.
- Take time to solve problems when they arise.
- Often groups can benefit from revisiting or resetting the norms for the group. This can be done at any point in the year and as frequently as needed. Some classes find they can benefit from this on a daily basis. When you are revisiting the norms, be aware of your tone of voice and body language so that is perceived as being positive and encouraging.
- Try having students make name tags that stay on their desks so that students can call each other by name. This can be especially beneficial for new students.
- If the group seems to be having challenges add in some fun games that facilitate better listening and trust among the students. For younger students: <http://www.icebreakers.ws/classroom-icebreakers>. For teens: <http://www.greatgroupgames.com/ice-breaker-games-for-teens.htm>
- Use reframing to help high school students see a new perspective during discussions (see [Emotional Care Unit](#), Reframing Techniques lesson, pp. 29-35).

## HOW TO EXTEND LEARNING

Students can often benefit from extending learning in any subject matter beyond the classroom and social and emotional learning is no exception. Below RAK has provided ways to extend learning:

- Ask permission (from students and school) to share about your school's work with RAK on your website.
- Consider tweeting or posting videos on social media showing acts of kindness at your school.
- Challenge students to find ways to extend RAK into other subject areas such as math, language arts, science, gym, etc.
- Share the work that your RAK group is doing in a school assembly.
- Coordinate with other teachers so that students can each other classes or grades about what they've learned in the lessons about the benefits of kindness.
- Create a RAK bulletin board to share stories of kindness from around the globe to counteract negative news.
- Use your RAK club as a springboard to doing other fun, kindness projects in your community, such as volunteering at a senior center or elementary school.
- Create a kindness club that performs acts of kindness both in the school and in the community.
- Celebrate kind things that are happening at your school by inviting the local newspaper to cover classes sharing work that they have done on a RAK project or for a school assembly where students are being honored for their kind work in the community.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: 20 Tips for Creating a Safe Learning Environment <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/20-tips-create-safe-learning-environment-rebecca-alber>
- Article and video about Morning Meetings: These can be adapted to Weekly Meetings <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/morning-meeting-changing-classroom-culture-lisa-dabbs>
- Book: The Little Book of Circle Processes : A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking (The Little Books of Justice and Peacebuilding Series) (Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding), Kay Pranis (2005)
- Video: Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Tier One. Community Building Circle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdKhcQrLD1w>
- Website: PrevNet: Bully Prevention <http://www.prevnet.ca>
- Ted Talk: Rita Pierson- Every Child Needs a Champion [http://www.ted.com/talks/rita\\_pierson\\_every\\_kid\\_needs\\_a\\_champion](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion)

