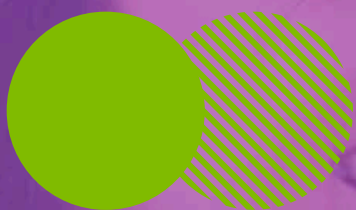


EDUCATOR TOOLKIT: BUILDING MENTAL HEALTH SKILLS FOR STUDENTS



A Toolkit for
Educators
Supporting Youth
Mental Health



MIDDLE SCHOOL

Acknowledgements

CONTENT CREATED BY



FUNDING PROVIDED BY



This toolkit was made possible through the support of our educator and caregiver advisory boards, whose insight and feedback helped ensure these resources reflect the needs of Arkansas students, families, and schools.

Introduction

Children's mental health affects their abilities to learn, build relationships, and thrive in school. Many students carry stress, emotional challenges, or trauma that can negatively impact their engagement and performance in the classroom.

Like physical health, mental health improves through learning and using strategies that promote wellbeing. Unfortunately, most kids get little to no education on this topic.

Educators are not mental health professionals, but they are often one of the first adults to notice changes in a student's behavior or mood. This toolkit provides practical strategies educators can use to incorporate positive mental health skills into the classroom while helping identify students who may benefit from additional support. The content in this toolkit is designed specifically for middle school-aged children (ages 11-13).

ABOUT AR CONNECTNOW

At UAMS Health AR ConnectNow, our mission is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of Arkansans through trusted mental health education, support in finding high-quality mental health care, and practical tools to promote positive mental health. To find out more information about the program and trusted mental health resources, visit our website at uamshealth.com/ar-connectnow/

An Educator's Role in Their Students' Mental Health

Educators play a unique and important role in a child's life. They interact with students daily, often spending more time with them than other adults in their lives. They can support students in building positive habits for mental health in a meaningful way.

Educators are not expected to diagnose or treat mental health concerns. However, they play an important role in supporting student wellbeing.

EDUCATORS CAN

- Teach and model positive mental health skills
- Notice changes in behavior, mood, or functioning
- Document patterns of concern
- Connect students with appropriate school supports

Collaboration with counselors, administrators, and families helps ensure students receive the support they need.



LEARN MORE

Scan the QR code or visit the link below to learn more about common health concerns.



tinyurl.com/mr3vvfea

Building Positive Mental Health Skills

All students can benefit from learning strategies that help them calm their bodies, manage stress, and refocus attention. Just as teachers provide tools for academic learning, they can also model and practice tools that support emotional and behavioral regulation. These strategies are most effective when they are taught and practiced daily, rather than used only when a child is struggling or in crisis.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students in middle school are navigating rapid physical, emotional, and social changes while also facing increased academic expectations. At this stage, many students are beginning to seek independence but still benefit from structured support when managing stress or strong emotions. Incorporating these skills into the classroom as part of the daily routine helps students practice regulating themselves in real time and strengthens their ability to use these strategies more consistently on their own.

By embedding skills into classroom routines, students develop a personal “toolkit” of strategies they can use to navigate the ups and downs of life. Positive mental health skills benefit all students just as healthy physical habits benefit everyone.

Regular practice helps students build resilience and confidence so that, during moments of stress or challenge, they already have strategies they know how to use. These skills support the wellbeing of students and can create a calmer, more resilient classroom environment for everyone.

Benefits of Positive Mental Health Skills

Teaching and practicing coping skills give students tools they can carry with them outside of the classroom. Learning these strategies helps students pause before reacting and make thoughtful choices about how to respond to stress or frustration. This awareness supports stronger problem-solving and self-management both in school and in everyday situations.

This process builds resilience—the ability to recover from challenges—as well as self-regulation and confidence in managing stress.

When coping skills become part of daily classroom routines, they can make the school day run more smoothly for both students and teachers. Brief moments of breathing, movement, grounding, or visualization give students a structured way to reset their bodies and attention before challenges. Over time, this can lead to smoother transitions, fewer disruptions, and students who are better able to refocus on learning after moments of stress or frustration. This toolkit covers four overall types of positive mental health skills, as listed below.



Breathing

Calm the body
and mind



Movement

Release energy
and reset



Grounding

Connect to the
present



Visualization

Settle thoughts
and emotions

Breathing Skills

These skills provide visuals for creating steady, controlled breathing patterns, which slows down our stress response and increases focus. These activities can be discreet and done in almost any setting.



WHY IT HELPS

Negative emotions activate the body's stress response, making it difficult to regulate our feelings. Breathing techniques can help control our stress and slow down our bodies. For most children, it is difficult to make positive choices, inhibit impulses, or use coping skills until their stress response decreases.

WHEN TO USE

Breathing exercises can help students:

- After transitions such as changing classrooms, lunch, or recess
- During moments of anxiety, such as before tests or presentations
- After disagreements with friends or adults

BREATHING ACTIVITIES TO TRY

Balloon Breath

1. Imagine that your belly is a balloon.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 3 seconds, letting your belly rise like a balloon while your shoulders stay relaxed.
3. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds, deflating your belly like a balloon. Exhale longer than you inhale.
4. Repeat three or four times, or until you feel calmer.

Click the link or scan QR code to watch a short video!

tinyurl.com/Balloon-Breath-Video



Box Breathing

1. Imagine a box in front of you and use your breath to trace the edges.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds as you trace one side of the box, letting your belly expand and shoulders relax.
3. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 5 seconds as you trace the next side of the box, exhaling longer than your inhale.
4. Continue tracing each side of the box with your breath for several rounds, or until you feel calmer.

Click the link or scan QR code to watch a short video!

tinyurl.com/Box-Breathing-Video



Movement Skills

These skills provide playful, quick movements to help students release energy, reset their bodies, and improve focus.



WHY IT HELPS

Physical activity can release built-up tension, increase circulation, and connect mind and body. Movement causes our bodies to release brain chemicals that reduce stress and improve mood. In fact, regular aerobic activity is as effective as psychiatric medication for some mental health concerns.

WHEN TO USE

Movement skills can help students:

- After long periods of sitting in class
- When feeling restless, frustrated, or overwhelmed
- Before homework or other tasks that require focus
- As a healthy outlet for stress or strong emotions

MOVEMENT ACTIVITY TO TRY

Muscle Tension/Release

1. Start at your feet and legs. Gently tighten those muscles for a few seconds, then release.
2. Move to your hands and arms. Squeeze them tight, then release.
3. Tighten your stomach and shoulders, then release.
4. Gently squeeze your face muscles, then release and notice how your body feels now.

***Click the link or scan QR code
to watch a short video!***

tinyurl.com/Tension-Release-Video



Grounding Skills

These skills help students connect to the present moment by focusing attention on their senses or surroundings, which supports calm and reduces overwhelm.



WHY IT HELPS

Emotion dysregulation, or emotions that are out of control, take over our attention and thoughts. Grounding skills include strategies that redirect attention to the present moment, which helps our brain and bodies switch gears. These strategies also help reverse the body's stress response and improve relaxation.

WHEN TO USE

Grounding skills can help students:

- When feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated
- During periods of stress or anxiety
- When struggling to stay focused or present
- After conflict or emotionally difficult situations

GROUNDING ACTIVITIES TO TRY

Sensory Countdown

1. Look around the room and notice five things you can see.
2. Find four things you can touch without moving.
3. Listen for three things you can hear right now.
4. Notice two things you can smell.
5. Notice one thing you can taste.

Click or scan QR code to watch a short video!

tinyurl.com/Sensory-Video



Body Scan

1. Take a few slow, deep breaths and relax your shoulders.
2. Starting at your feet, slowly notice each part of your body.
3. Move up your body, part by part, like an x-Ray and relax any tension.
4. Finish with one more deep breath and thank your body.

Click or scan QR code to watch a short video!

tinyurl.com/Body-Scan-Video



Visualization Skills

These skills use mental images or visual aids to help students understand and settle strong thoughts or emotions.



WHY IT HELPS

Visualization gives students a concrete way to understand emotions and see that intense feelings can settle. Visualization helps us put distance between our minds and our emotions, reducing emotional intensity and improving relaxation. Visualization can be used to teach about emotions or to reduce distress when feeling overwhelming emotions.

WHEN TO USE

Visualization skills can help students:

- Prepare for tests, presentations, performances, or competitions
- Reduce anxiety before challenging situations
- Build confidence before difficult conversations
- Unwind and transition into rest at the end of the day

VISUALIZATION ACTIVITY TO TRY

Look for Green

1. Choose your favorite color (for example, green).
2. Close your eyes and picture that color. Notice how it makes you feel. Do you feel calm?
3. Open your eyes and slowly look around the room.
4. Count how many things you can find that are in your favorite color.

Click the link or scan QR code to watch a short video!

tinyurl.com/Look-for-Green-Video



Building Skills Guiding Principles

Practice Before Crisis

Introduce and rehearse skills during calm times, not just when emotions are high.

Keep It Brief

Activities can take one to five minutes and fit naturally into transitions.

Model the Skill

When teachers practice alongside students, it reinforces the idea that everyone benefits.

Build the Routine

Link skills to daily activities (e.g., morning meetings, after recess, or before tests).

Offer Choices

Provide a menu of strategies so students can discover what works for them. Remember that everyone is different and some strategies will not work for some students.

Manage Expectations

Most children will need some adult support to regulate their emotions. Other factors can make this process take longer. Encourage independence while offering appropriate support.

Remembering Calming ≠ Calm

Some students will need to increase their movement and activity to calm down. This is common in developmental disorders. Try brief intense physical movement (e.g., jumping jacks, running, pushing something heavy). Help students learn what skills they can use in the classroom.

Conclusion

Educators don't have to take on the role of a mental health therapist to play an important role in supporting student mental health. What teachers can do is notice changes in behavior, create safe and predictable learning environments, and give students opportunities to practice coping skills.

When mental health is understood as part of overall wellbeing, the classroom becomes a place where students feel valued and supported.

By talking openly and respectfully about feelings and modeling simple regulation strategies, educators help reduce stigma and empower students to take care of themselves. These practices benefit not only individual children but the classroom community as a whole, creating an environment where learning and connection can thrive.

WHEN MORE SUPPORT IS NEEDED

When concerns go beyond what can be addressed in the classroom, educators play a key role in connecting students to school support staff and following established protocols. Together with counselors, families, and community resources such as AR ConnectNow, teachers contribute to a larger network of care that ensures students do not face challenges alone.

Appendix

This appendix includes classroom materials that support the skills in this toolkit. Educators may print, display, or incorporate these resources into daily routines. Links below provide direct access to the resources.



Scan the QR code or click the link to access additional resources.

Note: Posters are designed for 11x17 display but can be printed on standard 8.5x11 paper.

Balloon Breathing



Video

tinyurl.com/Balloon-Breath-Video



Poster

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Box Breathing



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Look for Green



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Appendix

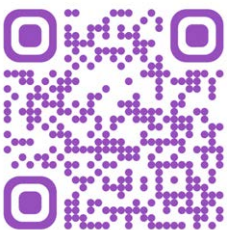
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Sensory Countdown



Video

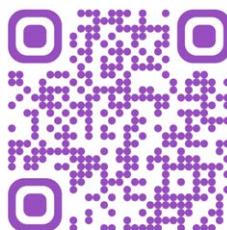
tinyurl.com/Sensory-Video



Poster

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Body Scan



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