



10 Approaches Supporting School Mental Health

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Mental health literacy refers to providing all children and youth with a working knowledge of: positive mental health and how to take care of one's mental health; early signs of mental ill-health and symptoms associated with mental disorders; how to seek help when feeling unwell emotionally; effective self-help strategies for mild problems; and how to support others facing a mental health crisis. School personnel can embed information about mental health throughout the school day during language arts, art, health, therapy sessions, and even during lunch and recess!

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a framework used to guide the process of helping children and youth develop critical skills for life – how to get along with others, handle challenges, and behave ethically. SEL helps student recognize and manage emotions, think about their feelings and how one should act, regulate behavior based on thoughtful decision making, and acquire important social skills for developing healthy relationships in life. Schools are encouraged to teach core SEL competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) in developmentally appropriate ways from pre-school through high school. Refer to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at www.casel.org

Sensory Strategies, Self-regulation, & Interoception: *Sensory processing* is a person's way of noticing and responding to sensory messages from their bodies and the environment. Some people have sensory processing differences that may affect their behavior, social interaction and regulation of emotions. *Self-regulation* is the ability to manage and control our emotions and behavior. *Interoception* is the sense that provides information about how our body is feeling in the inside (e.g. a dry mouth, growling stomach, or clammy hands) and respond to these feelings in order to take care of ourselves. For further information refer to: *The Zones of Regulation*® (www.zonesofregulation.org); *The Alert Program*® (www.alertprogram.com); and *The Interoception Curriculum* (www.kelly-mahler.com) Consult with the school's [occupational therapist](#) to learn more.

Cognitive Behavioral Strategies focus on teaching people how to modify thought patterns to change troublesome feelings and behavior. The emphasis is on helping the person identify cognitive distortions (e.g. inaccurate beliefs), learn effective self-help skills, and practice them daily. Changing how we think can change how we feel and function. Refer to the 'Thinking Strategies' included in the [Calm Moments Cards](#).

Mindfulness, Yoga, & Relaxation Strategies are found to be promising practices in school settings for improving coping abilities and reducing anxiety. Such practices help students 'step back' from stressful situations by teaching them how to purposefully and non-judgmentally 'be in the moment'. Mindfulness can involve deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. Yoga activities for school settings are available (e.g. www.yoga4classrooms.org). Refer to the 'Calming and Focusing' activities included in the [Calm Moments Cards](#).



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Environment-focused Intervention simply refers to how changing the environment to meet the needs of a student can foster successful participation. The focus is on providing the necessary supports (e.g. physical, social, activity-based), removing barriers, and building strengths. The [Comfortable Cafeteria](#), [Refreshing Recess](#), and [Making Leisure Matter](#) initiatives emphasizing creating supportive social, emotional, physical, and sensory environments to foster successful and enjoyable participation for students with, without, and at-risk for disabilities and/or mental health challenges.

Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) is a framework for promoting positive behavior by creating school environments that proactively encourages appropriate behavior and prevents problem behaviors. PBIS approaches are based on evidence-based behavioral interventions and are applied at a whole school level providing a continuum of strategies and supports at the *universal* (all students), *targeted* (for those at-risk), and *intensive* level (for those with identified behavioral challenges).¹ For more information, refer to the OSEP Technical Assistance Center on PBIS (www.pbis.org).

Trauma Informed Care (TIC) involves all school providers and adults serving youth to be knowledgeable about recognizing signs of trauma and interacting with children in ways that promotes their development and functioning. TIC involves: recognizing signs of trauma and related symptoms; creating safe environments (social, emotional, and physical); and implementing evidence-based TIC strategies that promote resilience and protective factors. Refer to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org).

Positive Youth Development focuses on helping children and youth develop individual strengths and improve assets that help them to grow and flourish. Specifically, helping youth participate in out-of-school structured leisure activities is associated with positive outcomes including improvements in academic achievement as well as personal (identity and skill development) and interpersonal development (social skills and friendships). Refer to the [Making Leisure Matter](#) initiative for universal, targeted, and individualized strategies for promoting leisure participation.

Bully Prevention & Friendship Promotion. Because bullying can affect the entire student body and school climate, research supports universal school-based programs as opposed to involving only victims and bullies. Refer to the PBIS [Bully Prevention Manual](#) for how to teach children to respond to bullying in an assertive manner. Research suggests that having high-quality friendships, or at least one good friend, can help prevent children from being a victim of bullying. Tune into friendships! Refer to Week 2 of the [Comfortable Cafeteria](#) and [Refreshing Recess](#) programs for helping teach children how to be a good friend and respect differences.

