

BOYS TOWN

Teaching Strategies for Supporting the Academic, Behavioral, and Emotional Needs of Students

In 2023, the Child and Family Translational Research Center of Boys Town National Research Hospital conducted a research study with teachers to gain an understanding of the challenges faced in the classroom since the COVID-19 pandemic, and solutions to address these challenges. Focus groups were held with 3rd through 8th grade teachers from metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools across the United States to gain an understanding of student behavioral and emotional challenges faced in the classroom since the pandemic, and solutions they found helpful to address these challenges.

Several themes emerged based on the ideas shared by the teachers. The following is a summary of techniques recommended by the teachers to help students recover academically and socially from the pandemic. The document was developed on behalf of those teachers so their ideas could be shared with other teachers, school administrators, and parents.

Social & Emotional Learning Techniques

TEACH SKILLS

- Teach social skills to students and model appropriate behavior.
- Adopt social and emotional learning curriculums.
- Teach all students goal setting strategies for both academic and personal goals.
- Teach social emotional learning to all students by using online content, children's books, or other methods.
- Teach skills like planning, prioritizing and organizing.
- Teach students to communicate, resolve conflicts and problem-solve.
- Practice social skills with role playing games and social stories.

STRUCTURE CLASSROOM

- Help decrease student anxiety about transitions by having a color-coded visual schedule, so students always know what is coming next and where to go.
- Repeatedly review behavior expectations -- repetition, repetition, repetition.
- Proactively try to help students who struggle behaviorally by helping them get organized and talking with them about goals.
- Use proximity with kids as they are starting to misbehave; stand near them and redirect them.
- Help teach students how to organize themselves with color-coded materials and folders as well as graphic organizers.

STRUCTURE CLASSROOM (CONTINUED...)

- Redirect students to the desired behavior.
- Provide lots of structure for your classes (like academic to do lists) to help keep students engaged.
- Try to deal with student-peer conflicts by stepping into a calm space (e.g., the hallway), allowing students in the classroom to stay on task.
- After conflicts, help students process the event by teaching them how to take the other person's perspective.
- Provide visual reminders to the class with posters, goals for the day, social skills, etc.
- Support schoolwide systems for consistent routines/expectations.
- Use positive language and phrasing with students.
- Allow for moments of reflection after events, once everyone is calm, either verbally or written.
- Offer students the ability to take breaks or use a "finish it later" folder.
- Build resilience perspectives in students by teaching them to frame things with "yet" ...e.g., "you cannot do it yet".
- Have a consistent Start of Class Routine.
- Remember some students may be "acting out" to cover up academic deficits.
- Use a variety of types of contracts with students regarding the expected behavior in the classroom, and sometimes include parents in the contracts.

EMPOWER STUDENTS

- Involve the students in running the classroom and have routine classroom meetings.
- Use small groups to address concerns and teach skills.
- Have students reflect on the positives and negatives over the past month.
- Accept and encourage student feedback and ideas.

USE SCHOOL SUPPORTS

- Work with administration to have staff that can assist with student behaviors.
- Provide after-school programming.
- Provide mentors for students with frequent discipline issues and who check-in with the students daily.
- Recognize student's success by providing "Positive Office Referrals".
- Use a School Resource Officer.

Academic Support Techniques

HAVE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

- Repeatedly review academic expectations,
- Set and maintain expectations for academics and behavior, don't lower the bar, but help students meet expectations.
- Have consistent expectations as a school staff.

ENCOURAGE STUDENT INPUT

- Ask students about their goals and help them set challenging but attainable goals.
- Facilitate group discussions and help students share their thoughts and feelings.

ENCOURAGE STUDENT INPUT (CONTINUED...)

- In early grades, conduct morning meetings or check-ins with quotes, videos, and an opportunity for students to talk and share how they are doing.
- Encourage different forms of self-expression.
- Take time to acknowledge "this is hard" but we can do it.
- Use project-based learning with student choice.

USE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Have classroom libraries to get students back into reading.
- Look for opportunities to get kids physically active, even while in the classroom.
- Use hands-on activities and experiences as much as you can, especially in topics like science.
- Provide cooperative learning activities.
- Make personal connections to the material with students so it is relevant to their lives.
- Provide activities that challenge students.
- Provide multicultural assignments and lessons to help engage students.
- Switch up tasks that might be difficult or boring.
- Offer time for students to explore without learning expectations.
- Provide groupwork where all have roles and can learn to work as a team.
- Use incentives where if doing quality work, on time, and paying attention in class, then no homework.

OFFER EXTRA SUPPORT

- Provide access to more librarians and books.
- Provide extra help before and after school to help students -- this also helps students feel like their teacher is making time for them.
- Provide schoolwide after-school tutoring opportunities.
- Consider giving additional support to similar groups of students in ways that meet their needs (for when you cannot meet with them all individually).
- Remember to keep a balance of providing additional support before/after school and your own well-being.
- Partner with their Community Learning Center to provide additional support to students outside of school.
- Teachers and schools have found the Cooperative Learning Techniques helpful - ex. curriculum on how to work together, sharing ideas, interactions, students are grouped by ability, then paired with academics.
- Use homework hotlines.

MODIFY ACADEMICS

- Reconsider assigning homework and rather focus on working hard during the class time.
- Consider using oral administration of activities and assessments (e.g., reading instructions or questions to the whole class more frequently).
- Post homework online so students can easily check for assignments and see what they have completed.
- Meet students where they are.
- Be flexible by extending deadlines, taking late work when appropriate.
- Provide a quiet location for students who prefer silence when working.
- Use gradual release techniques like "I do, we do, you do" lessons and activities – to help build student confidence.
- Provide heavy spiraling and scaffolding – going back to basics then spiral into current lessons.

RELATIONSHIP TECHNIQUES

HAVE SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

- Work to build relationships with students beyond the classroom, such as after school clubs, games, concerts, and show up to their activities.
- Greet students as they enter the classroom and show students you value them.
- Acknowledge students' feelings as valid.
- Notice changes in students and tell them how you see them growing and improving; like making small improvements in their behavior.
- Provide a listening ear to students and handle tough conversations delicately.
- Create a culture of interest in students' lives, like talking about students' interests during class.
- Ask kids to share "good things" happening to them, but also allow them to share "bad days" to feel supported and learn from the teacher/class how to positively reframe these experiences.
- Create opportunities for problem-solving and discussions with individuals and the whole class.
- Provide lots of verbal praise for students doing hard things.

MODEL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

- Find ways to connect with students to show you care about them.
- Remind students they do not need to be perfect. It is helpful to let students see teachers falter or learn from mistakes to see we are not perfect all the time (e.g., making spelling or math mistakes). It is important to admit teachers and adults do not have all the answers. We are all learners.
- Model how to stay positive in your conversations and interactions with others (students, teachers, staff, families).
- Be consistent and follow through. If you say you are going to do something, then do it.
- Be intentional in how you talk with students.
- Model how to have a growth mindset.
- Include team building activities to promote positivity.
- Try to be firm but fair with students to develop good relationships, especially those struggling with their behavior.
- Create a positive classroom atmosphere students want to be a part of at school.
- Provide fidget tools to help students regulate their emotions to be the most successful.

SUPPORT STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

- Getting to know and creating relationships with students and their families (e.g., attending student activities outside of the school day).
- Meeting students and families where they are and try to set aside pre-conceived notions about students and families.
- Go out of your way to connect with students when you see them at school activities.
- Provide opportunities to help students outside of the classroom like peer tutors.
- It is important that the school administration set a positive environment with the staff, who in turn can help share that positivity with the students.
- Teachers, administrators, staff, and community people hold posters to welcome students back to school at the start of the year.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TECHNIQUES

PROVIDE REWARDS FOR MEETING EXPECTATIONS

- Create a reward system.
- Offer "Blitz Days" or "Fun Fridays" where if students meet a goal (like no missing assignments) they get access to privileges, treats, incentives, or surprises.
- Give rewards such as extra recess time, zone out time, listening to music while they work, treat/food days for doing the expected work or behavior.
- Have an incentive system where you give out "tickets" to students for following classroom/school expectations that can be turned in for a prize.

USE PRAISE

- Focus on the positive and praise students.
- Notice, praise, and reinforce gains in academics and their hard work and effort.
- Celebrate accomplishments for individual students, groups of students, or the whole classroom.
- Have clear classroom and student expectations then positively reinforce these expectations.
- Call-out students doing the right thing by saying "Thank you _____".

SCHEDULE FUN BREAKS INTO THE DAY

- Create friendly competition and games among class periods, like which group was first at reaching a goal.
- Do something fun in the middle of the period.
- Try to take "brain breaks" from the curriculum.
- Turn learning and lessons into games and make it fun.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS TECHNIQUES

INITIATE COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

- Keep parents informed by sending weekly update emails.
- Remember to call parents with positive news about their child, especially early in the school year to help create a good relationship with parents.
- Consider a variety of ways to recognize student behavior parents will see -- in addition to phone calls consider post cards from teachers to every student in the class, handwritten notes home, recognition on school social media for a goal accomplished.
- Meet quickly with the family when there is a concern, so everyone can be responsive to the problem.
- Use parent-teacher conferences to include aspects on classroom or school expectations and how the student is doing behaviorally and socially at school.
- Establish a school-wide effort to keep an open line of communication between teachers, school, and families.
- Use software to help parents see how their student is doing in the classroom behaviorally.
- Teachers and school consider using apps to help keep families informed on activities/events happening at school.
- Send weekly notes or reminders home tends to work better in the middle of the week than on a Friday since notes tend to get lost or forgotten over the weekend. This is true for paper and electronic reminders.

GET TO KNOW FAMILIES

- Be in touch with parents often and in a variety of ways (text, email, phone calls, notes home, photos of student's success, in person meetings) to help get to know students and families and let them know about concerns and successes.

RESPOND TO PARENT NEEDS

- Provide opportunities for parents to have face to face meetings.
- Provide sessions at school for parents on topics like "How to support your child's education".
- Adjust your expectations for students or families and meet them where they are.
- Schedule Parent-Teacher Organization events so parents can attend the school building outside of the regular school day.

TECHNIQUES FOR SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

HAVE HEALTHY EXPECTATIONS

- Set reasonable expectations for yourself that are not too high.
- Consider the areas you have control over.
- Give everyone, students and yourselves, some grace.

USE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

- Ensure privacy for students to meet with a therapist during the school day.
- Designate who will email school counselor to set-up visits when requested by students.
- Identify students for learning and emotional/behavioral support. Make sure eligible students are invited and included in services.
- Request help from school counselors.

PROVIDE FOR BASIC NEEDS

- Have a pantry with snacks for kids to eat during the day or take home.
- School provides sanitary baskets to be sent home with students in need.
- School has clothing available for students in need.

TEACH CALMING TECHNIQUES

- Model and teach calming strategies.
- Allow students to call parents during the school day if child is feeling anxious.
- Provide time when students and teachers can talk about things going on with life, friends, and family.

USE SCHOOL RESOURCES

- Create separate teacher and student wellness centers -- a quiet, calming space that doesn't look like a school classroom.
- Have the school counselor come to the classroom (instead of students going to counselor) for weekly classroom lessons.
- Do more team consults for students.



TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING TECHNOLOGY

SHAPE STUDENTS USE OF TECHNOLOGY

- Use technology as a reward for completing a goal like academic work or good behavior (access to devices, social minutes).
- Continue to adopt and adapt online tools.
- When teaching virtually, make sure students are engaged while still being able to assess them.

LIMIT OVER RELIANCE ON TECHNOLOGY

- Implement numbered pocket charts for phones, so phones don't distract students during class.
- Don't stop using paper/pencil aspect of assignments.

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