

Building Awareness of Coping Skills in the Classroom

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Children's
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Guiding principles

We can't expect students to identify, express or manage feelings if they don't have a basic understanding of what feelings and coping skills are. When talking about feelings and coping skills with students, it is helpful to keep the following guiding principles in mind.

All feelings are normal and valid. Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. It is also very normal to feel more than one feeling at a time. Let students know their feelings are normal and that you understand by repeating back what you hear, without judging or interpreting—even if you don't agree with them. When students feel heard and validated, they are more likely to share in the future.

It's never too early or too late to learn how to express and manage feelings. There is no correlation between a student's age or grade and their knowledge of feelings and coping skills. Students only know what they have been taught or exposed to, so we can anticipate that different students will have different skill levels—and that's OK.

Follow the students' lead. If students are uncomfortable sharing feelings, let them know that is OK and that you, or another trusted adult, are always available if they want to share later. Similarly, if a student does not feel comfortable practicing a specific coping skill, encourage them to find another option they do feel comfortable practicing.

Be curious. Sometimes students need help identifying, expressing and managing what they're feeling. Getting curious allows the student to explore their own feelings.

"I wonder" statements are a helpful tool for encouraging students to explore their feelings:

“ I noticed you threw your paper on the floor. **I wonder** if you are feeling frustrated about this assignment. ”

“ **I wonder** if it's too hard to focus on deep breathing right now. Why don't we go for a short walk instead? ”

Classroom activities for building awareness of coping skills

Coping skills are strategies we use to manage feelings and handle stress. It's never too early or too late to start developing healthy coping skills, and teaching students healthy coping skills will help them become more resilient (better able to handle life's ups and downs).

Here are some tips to get started:

Define coping skills for students. Explain that a coping skill is something anyone can do to help themselves feel better and manage stress. Here are some ideas for how to introduce coping skills to your students:

- "Did you know drawing can be fun and helpful for our bodies and minds at the same time? Drawing can be a coping skill, and a coping skill is a tool to help us better manage our emotions. After we finish these drawings, let's see if you feel more relaxed."
- "We are going to try a coping skill called grounding. Coping skills are tools to help us better manage our emotions, and grounding is a way to help refocus our minds when we get distracted or overwhelmed. Let's try it and see how that works for you."

Introduce new skills when everyone is calm. It is difficult to learn something new when we are anxious, tired, distracted or upset, so teach new coping skills when everyone is calm (instead of in the heat of the moment).

Try lots of different options. What works one day (or in one situation) may not work the next, so it's helpful to have options to choose from. Here are some ideas to get you started:

For younger students:

Drawing, coloring, painting, singing songs, taking deep breaths, moving (dancing, jumping jacks, running in place, stretching, etc.)

For older students:

Journaling, free writing, listening to music, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, grounding, gratitude practice

Practice proactively and regularly. Help students become familiar with different coping skills so they feel more comfortable relying on them when they need them.

Practice throughout the day. There is no set time to try coping skills, but you may want to try including them first thing in the morning, during transitions, after lunch and before dismissal.

Never force kids to try coping skills. Don't force a student to participate if they are uncomfortable. Instead, say something like, "We are about to practice a coping skill. You can either practice along with the class or you can sit quietly in your seat until we are finished."