Kognito

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE:

Five Ways to Talk with Students Returning After Pandemic Closures

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have created the type of forced isolation some researchers expect will lead to a "mental health tsunami." Already, a survey from YoungMinds finds 67 percent of young people ages 13-25 believe the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.

The American Academy of Pediatrics reflected such concerns when it stated that grief due to loss, financial/employment concerns, social isolation and other pandemic impacts "demand careful attention and structured screening and supports," and that "schools should consider providing training to classroom teachers and other educators on how to talk to and support children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic."

THE APPROACH

Knowing how to talk with students in stressful situations is a skill. Effective conversation is less about always having the "right" response, and more about building a trusting relationship over time. It takes practice.

Here are some tips

- Use neutral language.
- Be specific in your observations about a student's behavior without judgement or exaggeration, separating the student from the behavior.
- Use "I" statements to make it clear you're focusing on your perception.
- Ask open-ended questions so a student can open up about how they're feeling.
- Reflect back what the student said to encourage them to talk about it—some call this "active listening."

In short, focus on neutral observable behaviors, ask open-ended questions, and restate what you've heard in reflections. Stay positive and specific.

> **"The emotional impact of the pandemic...demand[s] careful attention and supports in place during all modes of learning."**
>
> — **The American Academy of Pediatrics**

THE SITUATIONS

Here are five common situations educators may see more of—due to the stresses of the pandemic—as students return to school, as well as five ways educators can start a one-to-one conversation to help understand what's underlying a student's behavior.

SITUATION

1

Student is unusually quiet or withdrawn.

⊗ **Instead of saying:** *"Are you upset?"*
⊘ **A better approach:** *"How are you feeling?"*
Why this is better: Yes or no questions may seem more efficient, but open-ended questions allow for a student to provide more clarity.

SITUATION

2

Student is putting their head down during class.

⊗ **Instead of saying:** *"You have not been paying attention during class"*
⊘ **A better approach:** *"I notice you have been putting your head down during class."*
Why this is better: The "I" statement about an observable behavior starts the conversation on a neutral, non-judgemental note, and enables a follow-up open-ended question.

SITUATION

3

Student is missing a lot of school.

⊗ **Instead of saying:** *"You are falling behind, you can't miss more days of school."*
⊘ **A better approach:** *"I notice you have been absent more lately—can we talk a little about that?"*
Why this is better: The neutral, observable statement starts the conversation in a non-confrontational way. Asking if they are open to talking about the absences gives the student agency in the decision to open up, and builds trust.

SITUATION

4

Student is disruptive in class. As you speak with them about it, they say, "Everyone is annoying me today."

⊗ **Instead of saying:** *"You can't let everything get to you."*
⊘ **A better approach:** *"I hear you saying you are frustrated. What is making you feel that way?"*
Why this is better: Using a reflection helps the student feel heard, and an open-ended question gives them the chance to open up.

SITUATION

5

Student writes about a relative's death in a class assignment.

⊗ **Instead of saying:** Nothing, or ignoring the situation.
⊘ **A better approach:** *"You wrote about your uncle in your essay—this must be really hard for you."*
Why this is better: This gives the student a chance to talk about what's happening and opens the door to a "warm handoff" to a supportive counselor or administrator.

THE SCIENCE

These techniques draw on motivational interviewing (MI), an evidence-based communication strategy that empowers people to change their behavior. It's been around for more than 30 years and has been shown effective in multiple settings such as healthcare and substance use treatment, and more recently education. MI is a guiding style of conversation. Two key aspects of MI? Instead of giving information or advice, ask a question. Instead of criticizing, find something to affirm.

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percent of young people ages 13-25 believe the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.

— **YoungMinds**

PRACTICE MAKES US BETTER COMMUNICATORS

Supportive conversation techniques don't always come naturally. Practice makes us better communicators. Kognito has created conversation practice role-playing simulations in real-world settings for safe, participatory experiences that are as close to real life as possible, but without real-life consequences. The guided practice allows choosing from a set of conversation strategies that leads to effectively managing the conversation, providing better preparation.

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