

At-Risk for Elementary School

Identify students who may be at risk for psychological distress, approach them and their parents with concerns, and connect them to support if needed.

Identifying At-Risk Students

When identifying students who may be in distress, look for significant changes in behavior and look for behaviors that seem extreme. Trust your instincts. Below are some common warning signs of distress:

Signs of Distress

Behavioral

- Trouble concentrating, easily distracted
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Physical complaints, like headaches/stomachaches
- Lack of energy, loss of interest in activities
- Repetitive play that re-enacts a traumatic event
- Self-destructive behaviors, like skin picking
- Deceitfulness, theft, or property destruction

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Emotional

- Irritability, aggression, or anger
- Crying or having emotional outbursts
- Persistent/excessive fear of separating from parents; school refusal
- Nervous or easily startled, clingy
- Low self-esteem and negative self-talk
- Sadness, guilt, shame, or fear

Academic

- Refusal to complete assignments or comply with rules and requests
- Careless errors or impulsive choices on assignments
- Decline in academic performance
- Extreme nervousness around academics/excessive worry about getting everything right
- Forgetful of tasks and materials
- Frequent absences from school

Appearance

- Disheveled or worsening appearance, lack of cleanliness
- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Appearing very tired

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Bringing Up Concerns

When you are concerned that a student is experiencing distress, it is important to bring up your concerns in a way that facilitates discussion, minimizes defensiveness and prevents hurt feelings. The EASING model is a strategy for effectively bringing up concerns.

Check your own **E** MOTIONS
A SK for permission
 Be **S** PECIFIC
 Use **I** STATEMENTS
 Keep it **N** EUTRAL
 Show **G** ENUINE CURIOSITY

Techniques

	<i>Instead of..</i>	<i>Try...</i>
Check your own EMOTIONS	She has been disrespectful to me on several occasions.	Mia seems frustrated during some of our class activities.
ASK for permission	I'd like to tell you some things I've been seeing...	Would it be okay to talk about one or two more things I'm seeing, to help you get a better picture?
Be SPECIFIC	Mia feels insecure when she hears about fun things other students do outside of class.	The other kids were talking about a movie they'd all seen that Mia hadn't. She looked a bit uncomfortable and seemed to get upset at another student.

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	<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Try...</i>
Use “I” STATEMENTS	She’s destructive to school property.	Last week, I saw Mia writing on the wall outside the gymnasium with chalk, after we’d asked students not to do that.
Keep it NEUTRAL	Mia has been acting up a lot in class.	I’ve noticed that Mia sometimes seems a little agitated in class.
Show GENUINE CURIOSITY	So that’s what we’re seeing at school.	How is what you’re seeing at home similar or different to what I’m seeing at school?

Listening Actively

When you want to encourage another person to open up, avoid giving unsolicited advice, disagreeing, and criticizing. These ineffective tactics are likely to make the other person defensive and, therefore, prevent him or her from opening up.

<i>Ineffective Tactics</i>	→	<i>Negative Result</i>
Giving Advice		Makes the person defensive
Disagreeing		Turns conversation into an argument
Criticizing		Emphasizes your authority

Instead, use a combination of open-ended questions and reflecting statements.

Open-ended questions require more than yes-or-no answers.

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Open-Ended Questions

Instead of..

There have to be better activities for you that are calmer. What else could you do?

Try...

What parts of playing ball do you like?

Reflecting statements express what you think the other person is saying, thinking, or feeling. Using reflective statements can help you correct any misconceptions you have and shows the other person that you are really listening.

Reflecting Statements

Instead of..

I wouldn't worry about other people. It's not a race. Just do your best.

Try...

The way you said you're feeling behind... that's not a nice feeling.

Connecting Students to Support

When you have a student whom you want to connect to support, it's important to know the resources and policies in place at your school. You may be encouraged to involve people like:

- Principal or vice principal
- Counselor, school psychologist, or school social worker
- Another experienced teacher

If you will be speaking with **parents**, remember that they are also an important part of the team when determining how to best support a student.

- Ask for **their opinions** when bringing up recommendations
- Bring your recommendations up as a **question** (“What would you think about...?”)

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Crisis Situations

If you think that a student might be in immediate danger, follow the protocol defined for your school. Be sure to know your school policy. Although suicide rates among elementary-aged students are low, a threat should always be taken seriously. Never leave a student alone if you are concerned about suicide.

Risk Factors That Increase a Child's Risk of Suicide

- Mistreatment, trauma, or neglect
- Interpersonal family conflicts
- A history of persistent bullying and social rejection
- Having a mental health disorder, especially a mood disorder
- Lack of social support
- A recent or serious loss, such as the death of a loved one, a divorce, or the loss of a family member's job or home

Suicide Exposure:

- A past suicide attempt
- Family history of suicidal behavior or mental health disorders
- The suicide of a family member, friend, or other significant person
- Cultural and/or religious beliefs that suicide is a noble resolution of personal dilemma
- Access to lethal means like guns or knives

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Warning Signs That a Child May Be Considering Suicide

Significant Changes in Behavior:

- Extreme emotions
- Difficulty completing daily activities
- Academic decline
- Increased absenteeism
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Persistent physical complaints

Worrisome Behavior:

- Statements of hopelessness or language like “I don’t want to be here anymore” or “I just want to disappear”
- Communicating a wish to die
- Art or play involving death, violence, or loss
- Preoccupation with death
- Wanting to play with or handle weapons
- Risky or reckless behavior
- Signs of self-inflicted injuries