Mental Health Practice Toolkit
Create a Safe School Environment

Introduction

Second only to family, school is the most important stabilizing force in the lives of young people. This means school communities have an incredibly powerful opportunity to promote the wellness and healthy development of students by providing an environment where students feel psychologically and physically safe. Fostering a safe environment involves having clear and equitable school-wide expectations for behavior, ensuring staff model healthy interactions aligned with school-wide behavior policies, making space and opportunities for students to self-regulate and refocus, and using restorative practices when expectations are broken.
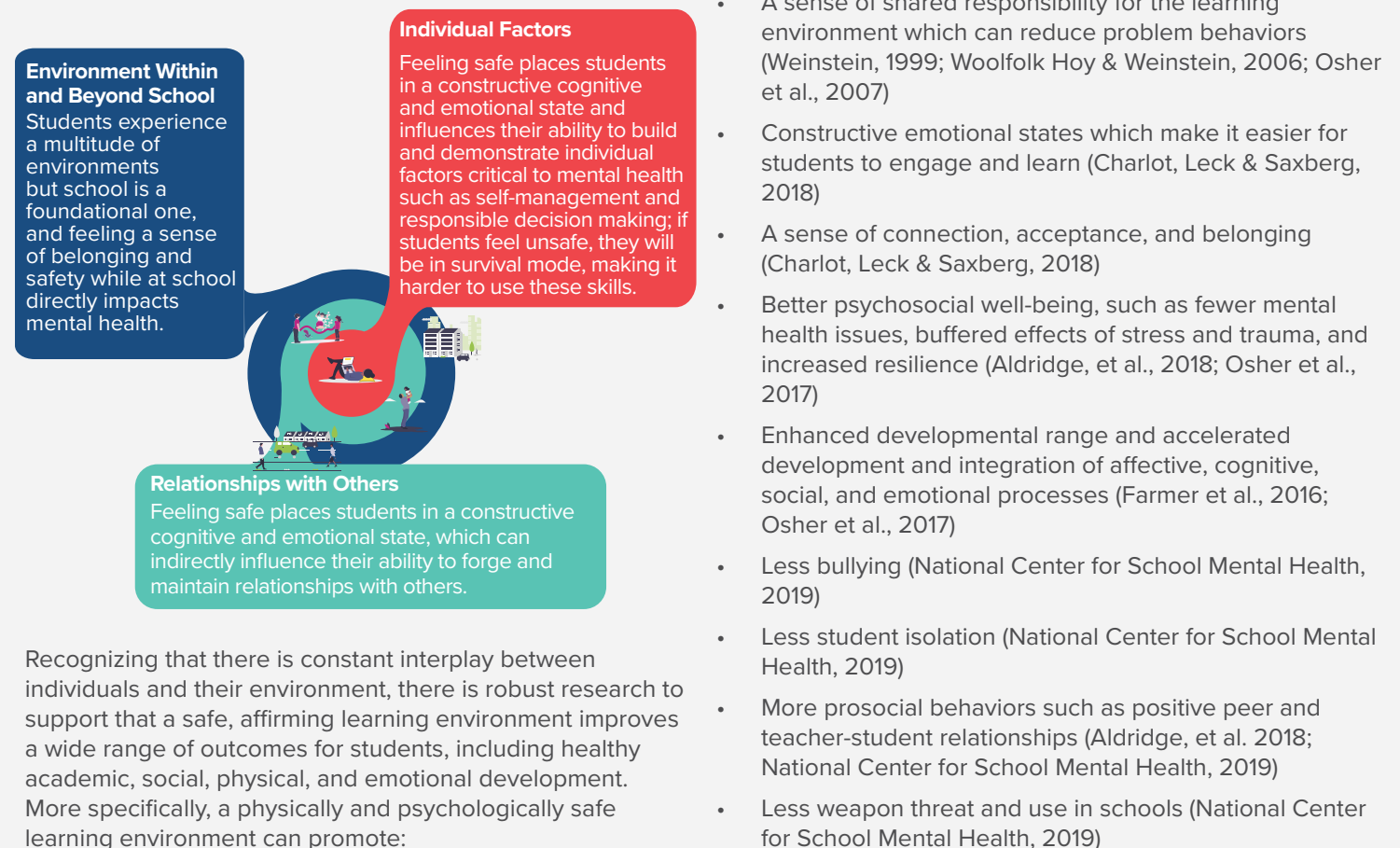
Guidance to Get You Started

- **Create a physical environment that is safe, welcoming, and accessible** for everyone in the community. This can be done through a variety of supports for different students:
  - All students can benefit from features of the physical environment that foster connection between students and the space. This could be accomplished by having students decorate learning spaces, creating displays that celebrate students' diverse identities and special accomplishments, and ensuring materials are organized and accessible to students, among other strategies.
  - All students can also benefit from lighting, acoustics, and temperature controls that ensure students are comfortable and limit distractions that can compromise students' focus. These design decisions may be especially helpful for students who have experienced trauma or struggle to operate in their executive state.
  - Open, communal spaces that are disability accessible will be essential for some students, but can also support all students by providing space to move and socialize.
  - Designated safe spaces inside and outside of the classroom that students can visit when experiencing behavioral and emotional challenges should be

A Look at Some Benefits

Environment Within and Beyond School
Students experience a multitude of environments but school is a foundational one, and feeling a sense of belonging and safety while at school directly impacts mental health.

Individual Factors
Feeling safe places students in a constructive cognitive and emotional state and influences their ability to build and demonstrate individual factors critical to mental health such as self-management and responsible decision making; if students feel unsafe, they will be in survival mode, making it harder to use these skills.

Relationships with Others
Feeling safe places students in a constructive cognitive and emotional state, which can indirectly influence their ability to forge and maintain relationships with others.

- A sense of shared responsibility for the learning environment which can reduce problem behaviors (Weinstein, 1999; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Osher et al., 2007)
- Constructive emotional states which make it easier for students to engage and learn (Charlot, Leck & Saxberg, 2018)
- A sense of connection, acceptance, and belonging (Charlot, Leck & Saxberg, 2018)
- Better psychosocial well-being, such as fewer mental health issues, buffered effects of stress and trauma, and increased resilience (Aldridge, et al., 2018; Osher et al., 2017)
- Enhanced developmental range and accelerated development and integration of affective, cognitive, social, and emotional processes (Farmer et al., 2016; Osher et al., 2017)
- Less bullying (National Center for School Mental Health, 2019)
- Less student isolation (National Center for School Mental Health, 2019)
- More prosocial behaviors such as positive peer and teacher-student relationships (Aldridge, et al. 2018; National Center for School Mental Health, 2019)
- Less weapon threat and use in schools (National Center for School Mental Health, 2019)

Recognizing that there is constant interplay between individuals and their environment, there is robust research to support that a safe, affirming learning environment improves a wide range of outcomes for students, including healthy academic, social, physical, and emotional development. More specifically, a physically and psychologically safe learning environment can promote:

available to all students, but may be especially important as a Tier 2 and 3 support for students experiencing more extreme and persistent stress. These spaces could include "peace corners" or "mindful moment" rooms. Students can use these spaces to self-regulate independently, or with the support of an adult.

- **Promote effective classroom management strategies** that enable social-emotional development and are characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; shared positive norms, goals, and values; and set routines and guidelines for behavior. More specifically:

  - Communicate developmentally appropriate expectations for learning and behavior that consider student needs, culture, and other individual differences

  - Create routines that promote student voice and autonomy and provide diverse opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved, learn, and be recognized

  - Use common language aligned with school-wide social-emotional learning goals

  - Provide learners with opportunities to deeply explore where they come from and to engage with new people, contexts, and activities. Encourage open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints

- **Develop behavioral expectations and discipline policies that are student-centered, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive.** How schools respond to behaviors that compromise the safety of the learning environment can have a large influence on school climate and students' mental health. Protocols to address bullying, harassment, bigotry, and other related behaviors should be clearly outlined. One way to integrate discipline policies into student development is through restorative practices. These practices help students understand the impact of their behavior, encourage respectful interactions with others, build self-awareness, and focus on repairing any harm done to the community. Additionally, targeted support should be provided for youth at risk of displaying behaviors that adversely impact the psychological and physical safety of others.

Additional Resources to Explore

Standards from National School Climate Center
The National School Climate Standards provide a research-based framework and benchmark criteria for educational leaders to support and assess district and school efforts to enhance and be accountable for school climate. They also provide guidance for professional preparation and continuing education.

The Third Teacher
This book explores the critical link between the physical school environment and how students learn.

Student Voice Toolbox
Here is a collection of tools you can use to embrace student voice in your school or community. This includes professional development or student training opportunities, and coaching for your school, classroom or program.

Building Equitable, Safe and Supportive Schools
In this white paper, you will learn how trauma-informed and sensitive practices are the foundation for equitable, safe, and supportive schools and learning environments. You also will discover easy-to-implement next steps and tips for planning for the future.

School Climate and Equity
An equitable school climate responds to the wide range of cultural norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, leadership practices, and organizational structures within the broader community. This document provides guidance for creating more equitable school climates through six promising strategies.