



Activation Plan

Providing Support for Upset Students



What to do when students get upset?

This activation plan, put together by school social workers, therapists, and teachers, is for your use when a student becomes upset and needs extra support.

Social and emotional learning helps students work through their thoughts and emotions; so it is no wonder that it can bring up some difficult feelings for students. While coping skills, I-statements, and other SEL skills can help students work through difficult moments, sometimes it takes a bit more teacher support for students to manage their feelings. In short, students can get pretty upset at times. That can happen both during and outside of SEL time and teachers should know how to handle those moments.

You may be thinking, “But I’m a teacher, not a therapist!” We agree. And often the goal is to direct a student to someone else in the school like a counselor. However, teachers are often the adult present when students do get upset, and thus they can and should know how to handle those moments in a productive way. Having a plan in place is particularly helpful because teachers can easily become frustrated in those moments themselves, making it harder for them to act calmly and in a way that leads to a healthy outcome and that is in line with the goals of SEL work.

The steps below are roughly in order and generally apply, but, of course, every situation is different.

1. Pause and notice your own feelings.

Be aware of your own emotions. Are you nervous? Are you feeling frustrated? Whatever the emotion, pause and breathe before responding.

2. Evaluate and ask to privately check-in.

Evaluate if the student needs to check-in privately. If so, tell them they are not in trouble and you want to check-in outside of the classroom or in a quiet space. Part of this is to “contain” the situation and it also gives the student some privacy. Follow your school guidelines on meeting with students privately - often a quiet chat in the hallway is what’s best.

3. Listen and validate.

When students express heavy emotions, validate, “it sounds like you feel/felt _____.” Teachers might feel that they have to solve the problem. Instead, allow the student to talk and be there to listen and support.

4. Together make a plan and thank the student.

With the student, make a plan for how they can continue the school day successfully and check-in again later. For many students, it is difficult to ask for help. If a student comes to you, genuinely thank them for sharing.

5. Ask for help and follow up.

While being supportive and empathic is key, if you need additional support from another adult in your building ask for it. Tell the student you appreciate them coming to you and you will follow up with the school counselor, therapist, or social worker.

Putting it all together.

Let's say a student in your class is getting upset during SEL when you are talking about relationships at home. Here is an example of a check in with a student.

Go over to the student and get down to physically be at their level. "Hey Brian, I noticed you seem upset. You are not in trouble. Can we check in in the hallway real quick?"

Once in the hallway, "Can you tell me a little bit about what you are feeling or why you feel upset right now?"

After the student shares, "It sounds like you have some pretty difficult things going on at home. Thank you for sharing that information with me. You know the adults at our school are all here to support you. I want to check in with the school social worker as well and maybe the three of us can talk together later after class. How does that sound? What do you need to be successful going back into the classroom?"

Thank you again for talking with me. Let's check in again later today."

We do not need to dive into every aspect of our students' lives, but when they have something they need to say and no one listens, we deprive them of a basic human need. When this need goes unmet, we see increased adverse behaviors, higher dropout rates, and overall lagging engagement. Adults at school can sometimes be the only safe adult in many students' lives. When you don't know what to say to a student, simply tell them you appreciate them coming to you and you will speak to a school mental health staff.