



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

# TEACHING ABOUT REFUGEES

**Guidance on working with  
refugee children struggling  
with stress and trauma**

Find more materials at: [unhcr.org/teaching-about-refugees](https://www.unhcr.org/teaching-about-refugees)

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## 1 Introduction



Whilst some refugee children can present challenging and worrying behavior at school and in the classroom, not all children who have experienced armed conflict and flight will suffer from trauma and stress.

This document deals with stress and trauma-related behaviours in refugee children. It aims to help teachers understand how stress and trauma can affect refugee children and students, and also to give some tips and advice to teachers on how to successfully include children and students who suffer from stress and trauma in their classrooms.

## 2 What experiences cause stress or trauma in refugee children?

Experiences that cause trauma or stress in refugee children range from living in and fleeing violent situations, losing loved ones and undertaking dangerous and stressful journeys to safety.

In addition, not knowing if one's status in a new country is permanent, living in poor housing and with limited resources and even living with parents or other care-givers that may be suffering from trauma or stress themselves, can contribute to refugee children's daily stress, and may further impact trauma they may have already experienced.

**What are PTSD, toxic stress, adjustment disorders - do I need to diagnose my students in order to help them?**

**You should not try to diagnose your students - teachers are not therapists.**

If you have concerns about the mental health of any of your students, refer them through the correct mechanisms to a mental health practitioner, a counsellor or a medic so that they may receive a proper diagnosis and the care and treatment they need.

However, school and most importantly the relationships formed at school can be an incredibly stabilizing, positive and nurturing experience in a child's or a student's life, which can help them move on from more challenging times. Paired with supportive help at home or in out of school life from parents, siblings, other family members and guardians, many children and students will overcome the challenges they are experiencing without additional help.

In this guidebook you will find a number of exercises that can be helpful to teachers with classes in which there are refugee students who may suffer from stress and trauma as well as guidance on creating an environment in the classroom and school that promotes well-being of children who struggle with trauma and stress.

**Why does a child's behaviour change when they experience stress and trauma?**

Children's brains, like adults', process and respond to experiences and information in stages. The stages generally progress from immediate physical responses like sweaty hands or a lump in one's throat to emotional responses, feeling angry or upset, and then

finally the “thinking part” of our brains will engage. Once the “thinking part” of our brain is engaged, we can organize our thoughts, take time to reflect about things, and act to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Children and students who have undergone trauma or extreme stress often act differently because their brains are overwhelmed with violent and stressful experiences that interrupt the normal flow of information and experience-processing.

What occurs is that the “thinking part” of the brain switches off, while parts that produce more emotional and physical responses are still switched on. This results in more extreme physical and emotional behaviour than might be expected in any given situation.

For example, a student who is having a discussion with someone may suddenly feel angry and hit another child without even realizing it, another child may suddenly begin to complain of a sore stomach, or a student might act emotionally distant to everyone around them and not wish to engage in any interaction at all.

### 3 What symptoms might a child or student display?

The list below describes behaviours common in children who are experiencing trauma and stress-related disorders.

#### Re-experiencing events

Children and students may repeatedly think about events they experienced or they may play out what happened. Often children are attempting to organize their thoughts when they play out a situation and are trying to change the result of the situation.

Some may also have nightmares. Some may react severely to things that remind them of the event in so-called memory flashes or flashbacks. (Alisic, 2010).

*“Suddenly images come to me, then everything is right there again, as if it were happening again, then I get so frightened, I cannot breathe and I just want to lash out or run away. It is really bad. Then I just want everything to stop, or to be dead.”*

**Mikaehla A., 16 years old,  
fled from Chechnya to Austria  
(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)**

#### Dissociation and having trouble concentrating

In case of a prolonged exposure, students, especially young children, may appear as if they are in a dream. They might experience life as if it were a film, or events might slow down or speed up for them. Some children and young people have the impression that they are no longer in their bodies. They may also have limited memory and seem to have forgotten key things about their past. (UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

*“Mostafa often stares into space in class. When his math teacher says something to him, Mostafa looks confused and does not seem to know where he is. Colleagues observe similar situations. At the end of the class, Mostafa is unable to summarise what has been discussed, and is ‘not really there’. He is seventeen years old and arrived in Austria alone after fleeing from Afghanistan. His family lives in Iran, where his father recently died from the consequences of untreated diabetes.”*

**(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)**

## How to deal with memory flashbacks and episodes where students appear 'not there'?

(UNHCR AUSTRIA/SIEBERT, 2016)



If a student experiences a memory flashback there are a few things you can do:

- Take some deep breaths and make sure you feel calm yourself before you engage.
- Try to catch or maintain eye contact if possible.
- Call the student by their name gently. Do not touch them at this stage.
- Re-orient them by telling them their name and saying that they are safe. Tell them where they are, the date and who you are. Repeat this step until the student is present in the moment.
- If necessary, create a stronger sensory stimuli. Speak a little louder or let them know you will touch them and put a gentle hand on their arm. If this occurs frequently and you are able to, place a cold cloth on their arm to help bring them back to the present moment.
- Once the affected student is back in the here and now, offer a quick explanation of what happened to them:
  - *“You were having a bad memory, but you are safe and here now.”*
- If possible, refer them to the school nurse or medical care for some rest-time and a drink or sweet snack. If not, see if you can offer some rest-time and a drink or snack in your classroom.
- After, ask the student privately if they wish to explain or help to explain to the class what happened, and plan how you will do this with them.
- Offer a simple explanation to the class about what happened, using the explanation above about how our brain processes information. Explain that the student is reacting physically and emotionally to something that reminds them of a situation in the past that was difficult.
- If there are questions, you could offer to write them down and see with the student themselves if they wish to answer them at a later date, either in writing or by speaking with the class.

### **Avoidance**

Children and adolescents suffering from trauma will often avoid situations, people, conversations and thoughts that appear to them as threatening or too emotional. This avoidance must be understood as an attempt to not be confronted with strong feelings. It is a numbing of emotions. (UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

*“Maryam has worked hard to learn German and will also be graded for this subject this school year. She does well on the first assignment. When the teacher praises her, she shows no joy whatsoever. She looks disconcerted, as if she does not know what to do with the situation.”*

(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

### **Being extremely alert, irritable or hypervigilant**

Some children may struggle with their brains being in a state of continuous alarm. They may seem restless and nervous. They may be easily startled or scared if there are noises or movements. They can also react negatively to changes in the classroom or school environment, for example to new teachers and new seating plans. At night, they may have trouble falling asleep and therefore come to school tired. (Alisic, 2010)

*“When Mahtab is sitting in class, her senses seem to be in a constant state of alertness. She constantly observes her classmates, the way they move, what they say, and the way they look at others. She scans her surroundings in search of potential dangers around her, and she also reacts very sensitively to loud noises, for instance when the school bell rings. It even seems to bother her when other children rustle or whisper. Sometimes she screams “Stop!””*

(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

### **Aggressive behaviour**

Children and young people may also behave aggressively. This could include physical confrontations, tantrums and threats. They may also find it very hard to calm down afterwards. For adolescents, aggressive behaviour can also be directed against themselves (e.g. self-harming behaviour, suicide attempts and alcohol and drug abuse). Aggressive behaviour can also be a response to a trigger. (UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

*“The way he approached me, it was suddenly just like back then, I was scared, and then I hit him because I thought I had to defend myself, otherwise he would do something to me.”*

**Mikaehla A., 16 years old,  
fled from Chechnya to Austria**

(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

### **Behaviour that is out of control, has no boundaries**

Students also often seem to have no behavioural boundaries and act out of control. This can be understood as an attempt to ask for such boundaries in order to achieve a greater sense of stability and security, and also to ask for more support and to be valued by others. (Siebert and Pollheimer-Pühringer, 2016)

### **Learning difficulties**

Children and students who are experiencing stress and trauma often appear as if they have learning difficulties. These include an inability to concentrate on tasks fully, finding it a struggle to remember information when they are working on a problem, difficulties in controlling their reactions, such as not being able to take a turn or wait to answer questions, and challenges in switching from one activity or idea to another quickly.

## Fears

School-aged children sometimes have a stronger or longer-lasting fear than their classmates of being abandoned (e.g. when saying goodbye to a guardian or parent in the morning). Many children are afraid that something bad could happen again at any time, or that they are still being persecuted. Children may also ask more questions about death and dying. (UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

## Changed attitude towards people, life and the future

Children and adolescents can often lose their trust in other people during war and flight. They may have no or only negative expectations for their life and their future. Some are convinced that they must die early. They may hold on to a negative attitude to protect themselves from further disappointments and dangers.

This occurs especially in children and adolescents who have lost one or both parents. Some children may also have feelings of guilt, which can be due to being a survivor and the pressure that can bring. (UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

*“Hassan from Somalia came to Austria as an unaccompanied minor refugee. One day he tried to take his own life and jump out of the window on the first floor but luckily was stopped by a friend.*

*After a short stay in an adolescent psychiatric unit, it was discovered that his mother is in hospital in Somalia and his siblings are asking him for money so his mother can have her operation.*

*However, Hassan is an asylum seeker who lives in an assisted living facility and receives primary care, but hardly has any money himself.”*

**(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)**

## Extreme lack of self-worth and self-confidence

Children who have experienced stress and trauma can struggle with self-esteem and this can impact their ability to try new things and feel confident in the activities and academic work they pursue.

*“When the children are asked to talk about their weekend in German class on Monday, eleven-year-old Khadeja is unable to reconstruct the events of the last two days.*

*Her four-year-old brother in pre-school, on the other hand, excitedly talks about the family reunion with his uncle and aunt, who are now living in Germany. She gives her notebook to the teacher saying “I cannot do it, I am stupid.”*

*Khadeja was six when she arrived in Austria, her brother was born a year after the successful escape. She never attended pre-school. Her mother tells the teacher that Khadeja was frequently ill, cried a lot and does not like to play with other children.”*

**(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)**

*“Neginah does not know what she wants; she often says “I don’t know” or “I can’t do it!” She behaves well, she never argues, she does not speak in class and she stays on her own during the break. She complies with the weekly schedule, doing one task after the other. When she does not understand an exercise, she stares at the wall and does not ask for help. She never complains and does not seem to particularly like anything. She does not want to go on excursions, even though her parents encourage her to do so.”*

**(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)**



### **Regressive behaviour**

Children may show regressive behaviour and fall back into earlier stages of development (e.g. renewed bed-wetting, thumb sucking). They may also have a greater need for affection and attachment. (Alisic, 2010 and UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

### **Physical complaints**

Children and students may complain of dizziness or palpitations well after the stressful events.

- Younger school children often complain of stomach pain, nausea and loss of appetite.
- Adolescents often suffer from headaches, migraines, neck, back and stomach pain.

(UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

### **Other issues refugee children face that can further negatively impact their experience of stress and trauma**

Something that distinguishes many refugee children and students who have suffered from other children who have suffered from trauma is that they are often subject to additional risk factors, such as:

- Living with a parent or guardian who has also experienced, or is experiencing, stress and trauma.
- If still an asylum-seeker, living in an uncertain situation (not knowing if one will stay in the country).
- Living in a challenging financial situation which adds more stress to their life.
- Living in a new place where community and social networks may be new or limited.

- Having experienced multiple traumas or stress (violence in their country of origin, losing a loved one, a stressful journey to a safe place).

Other factors which can further complicate the experience of stress and trauma in children include suffering from other mental health or cognitive challenges (ADHD, learning issues). (Alisic, 2010 and UNHCR Austria/Siebert, 2016)

## **4 How can teachers and schools help?**

### **As a teacher and individual**

Children who have experienced stress and trauma at all ages need support from stable and nurturing adults

This can include parents, family friends, counsellors, youth workers and teachers. Take note of who could be available for your students. Can you suggest a club or youth group to those seeking support? Remember that committing to developing a deeper and more supportive relationship with a student can take its toll.

Building a relationship and then backing away can be detrimental to a student struggling with stress and trauma issues, so try instead to introduce them to a group or others who have more availability. If you find yourself unable to continue to commit to a relationship with a student, take time to explain why you don't have so much time anymore, and ensure they understand that it is not the student that is the reason you are backing away. See if you can help them find others that they can talk to.



Children who have experienced stress and trauma may open up to you unexpectedly

It is important that the student feels heard and valued at this point and that you balance this with your needs and capabilities as a teacher. If you feel comfortable listening to the student for this time, ensure you are in, or can move to, a quiet place.

If you are not able to take on the information or if you are not in a good situation, use the following guidance:

- Let the student know that you believe what they need to say is important to you and you can see their need, their pain or struggle.

Example: “I can see that you need to speak to someone and I am happy you have come to me.”

- Explain that you are unable to give them the time right now to talk about it, and as a teacher your role is to find them someone to talk to about it.

Example: “Unfortunately I have “X” to do right now and I think that it would be better if you talked to “Y” about this. They will be able to listen and help you better. Would you allow me to introduce you to “Y” whom you can talk to about this?”

- Ensure you follow all school protocol on issues of confidentiality and child protection, and referrals for students with challenges you think need a diagnosis.

Children will need you to answer any questions truthfully

Children and students might have questions about how they feel, how they are impacting their classmates, or what will happen with

them. If you are unable to answer any of these, let the child or student know that you don’t know the answer and see if you can find the answer for them or refer them to someone who does know the answer. Do not avoid any issues, but follow the guidance above if you feel you cannot answer or are uncomfortable answering any questions.

### Work with parents and guardians

Building a strong relationship with parents so that the continuum of a stable and nurturing environment extends from home to school is crucial to supporting children and young people. Below are a number of suggestions for doing this:

- Regularly communicate about your student’s progress, positive achievements and any challenges (in a positive manner) with parents.
- Try to understand how the home is set up, what responsibilities the child has at home, what relationships are at play, how much time they have for homework, and the home culture.
- Consider holding a parent evening or a monthly breakfast club for your class to introduce parents to each other. Make sure you have provision for other siblings (a few books or toys) so that parents feel they can bring them along.
- If there are other parents of children in the class that appear open to connecting with refugee parents or new parents, make an introduction.
- Find a translator (another parent, a local community organization) if there is a language barrier.
- Share important school concepts and cultures that impact academic and personal achievement.

For example explain the benefits of extra-curricular activities, what homework or tutoring help might be available, why adequate sleep and rest-time is important.

- Encourage communication and questions from parents and students, and promote discussion with teachers and school staff when problems or issues arise.

Self-care is very important when working with children who may exhibit challenging behavior

Accessing existing support (school counsellors or psychologists available for teachers) or creating a group of teachers to talk about challenging experiences can be helpful. Finding ways to re-charge (doing exercise or meditation, catching-up with a friend or loved one, spending some time in nature) after a difficult day, week or period of time will increase your productivity and allow you to be a better teacher and person.

### **In the classroom**

Help to stabilize students or children struggling with trauma and stress by creating a reliable, daily, transparent time-table or rhythm during the school days

A transparent and reliable daily rhythm allows students to re-gain a sense of control over their daily lives. Ensure that daily rituals and traditions are developed together as much as possible and that they are clearly displayed. Refer to them when children or students feel disoriented. If there are changes to be made to the daily rhythm or class environment, ensure where possible, that children or students are taken into consideration in decision-making, and that the reason for changes and adjustments are transparent.

Encourage a sense of belonging and feelings of safety and security by creating welcoming, parting and acknowledgement rituals

The same greeting time or farewell time where students are acknowledged at different stages of the day can help build a sense of belonging and community. In addition, learning to say each child's name in the way they or their family prefer will acknowledge the importance of their culture and background, and help to build a sense of trust and a safe relationship. If final goodbyes are necessary, ensure students involved have time to express their feelings, perhaps by writing a poem, drawing a picture, or taking part in a goodbye song.

Increase student's self-confidence through encouraging participation

Let children and adolescents have a say in as much as possible. Take time out at the beginning of a term or class to develop a set rules together, and list them clearly in the classroom.

When a rule is broken, use it as an opportunity to remind everyone of the class rules. If possible discuss what, when or how students would like to learn together. This will encourage self-confidence in students and instil a belief that they are capable.

It may happen that a student shows no interest in an exercise or refuses to participate. You may be able to talk to them gently and encourage them but if this doesn't work, do not pressure them.

"Would you like to try this? It doesn't matter if you don't get it right first time. We can always try together later if you want and if you really don't want to do it, you don't have to."

For students that prefer to watch during certain activities, you can also hand out roles which encourage and emphasize different skills,

a “listening card”, “vocabulary builder card”, “observer card” where children or students can focus on listening skills, writing down new words or what they notice in different activities if they don’t want to take part in something directly.

Re-establish faith in adults by showing that teachers are human and make mistakes

Everybody makes mistakes. However, some children from war and crisis zones have experienced that adults can spread great terror, and even feel they have a right to do so.

For children like this, it is very liberating and reassuring to see that their teachers are capable of reflecting on their own actions and words, and that it is natural for them to apologise to their students when they have made a mistake.

Stop rumours and help explain behaviours and incidents to classmates

As you will be aware, rumours spread quickly in school. Children and students are often negatively affected by false assumptions and negative rumours that can come from home or classmates.

In addition, the media and other sources often present inaccuracies about difficulties refugee children can experience and difficulties they present for their class, school systems and communities.

It is best to consult the child or children in question before broaching any topic of explaining any behaviour that has impacted the class.

Ask whether that child wishes to be part of any explanation you will give. Ensure that explanations about singular events or general behaviour are short, simple and positive.

You can use the science of what happens in the brain (see above) to help.

“When we have experienced difficult things, the thinking part of our brain, that normally allows us to calm down may shut off or not work temporarily which can cause us to act more quickly with angry or sad behaviour.


This will not last forever.”


## 5.A For the primary school level

Below are a number of games, activities, exercises and pedagogical methods that can be used in the classroom to address the challenges of stress and trauma. They are focused on social emotional learning and developing skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-worth, empowerment, and self-confidence.

In addition, they address how whole class dynamics can impact individual well-being, including topics such as welcoming new arrivals, creating constructive learning environments for all children, and understanding classroom boundaries and behaviour.

### 5.A.1 Activities to build emotional intelligence and children’s skill and ability in recognizing their own emotions and reading other’s emotions

 **OBJECTIVES:** To build and reinforce emotional vocabulary for children who may have had their social-emotional development interrupted due to traumatic and stressful experiences.

 **DURATION:** 10 - 15 minutes for exercises 1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Exercise 1.4 can be used throughout the school day once introduced (10 minutes).

#### 1.1 Emotion recognition



**surprised**



**excited**

A set of pictures for this activity can be found in the activity sheet, which you can download on links below the link to this document. Print the PDF document and show the children the different faces and ask them to identify words to describe them.

For example: happy, sad, angry, tired, excited or surprised.

#### 1.2 Emotion charades

Children can play in small groups or with partners. Ask them to mimic the emotions they have learned and others they know. Allow them to teach each other new words that are familiar in their own households and cultures or their native language. This can be done both after 1.1 and then again after 1.3 once a more sophisticated vocabulary has been built.

### 1.3 Building emotional vocabulary

Introduce more complex and nuanced emotional vocabulary words by asking children if they know what they are. If not, use scenarios to explain the emotion and ask children to demonstrate what facial expression they might have: frustrated, exhausted, overwhelmed, astonished.

### 1.4 Expressing my feelings

Once children have a good idea of recognizing at least eight emotions in themselves (dependent on age), **put up 'emotion boards' in the classroom.** Use pin boards or sheets of magnetic laminated paper. One emotion is written at the top of each board. Children's photos or name tags can be placed in a basket below the board, or pinned on the emotion boards.

Children can take time out during the day to move or attach their name tag to a certain board to let people know how they are feeling. If you see a child struggling with a puzzle, you might recommend them choosing a board to move their name tag to a board to express their emotion. If you see someone very happy, you could do the same thing. Some of the emotions on the boards might be: frustration, happy, angry, left-out, excited and nervous.

## 5.A.2 Activities to help all children understand the experience of new arrivals in the classroom



**OBJECTIVES:** To ease stress of refugee children adapting to new classrooms and improve interactions between refugee and host-country children.



**DURATION:** 20 minutes



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** Worksheets with an "unintelligible" text and a set of "unintelligible" questions.

### 2.1 Learning a new language: lower primary

Bring the class into a group activity or circle-time and begin speaking in nonsense or pretend words for 30 seconds. After that, hand every child a sheet with two nonsense words or a nonsense paragraph on it. Ask them to translate or draw the words or write or draw their answers to questions on their sheets of paper.

Bring the class into a group discussion about the exercise and ask them how

they felt. Choose some words together that describe how they think a child who does not speak the language might feel the first days they come to school.

Ask the children what other things would be new to a child arriving from somewhere else and elicit more words of how they might feel.

### **2.2 Learning a new language: upper primary**

Give each child a worksheet with a text in a language they do not understand. Ask them to write answers to some accompanying questions on the sheet. Give them 10 minutes.

If you want to make the text and questions for the worksheet, type in the questions and reverse and flip the words using the tool on this website: <http://textmechanic.com/text-tools/obfuscation-tools/reverse-text-generator/>

After they have done this, take back the papers and mark them. Break the class into small groups and ask them to think about why you might have asked this task of them.

Bring the class into a group discussion about the exercise and ask them how they felt. Choose some words together that describe how they think a child who does not speak the language might feel the first days they come to school.

Ask the children what other things would be new to a child arriving from somewhere else and elicit more words of how they might feel.

**For 2.1 and 2.2, post the words up in the classroom and have an open board where children can volunteer things they could do to help ease new children's experience.**

## 5.A.3 Activities to create a peaceful classroom and constructive learning environment for everyone



**OBJECTIVES:** Ensure all children participate in the creation of boundaries and rules in order to contribute to a peaceful classroom environment.



**DURATION:** 20 - 30 minutes for each activity

### 3.1 Creating peace in me

As a group ask the children to reflect upon times when they felt sad, angry, annoyed, frustrated. Look back on previous activities to elucidate language, scenarios, actions and reactions the children could have when such emotions occur.

**Make a list of what types of things they can do themselves in order to calm down and process these feelings, and put this list on the wall.**

Encourage children to undertake these actions if you see any children expressing challenging behaviour during the day (hand them a book, take deep breaths with them, re-direct to another calming activity). Congratulate them if you see them actively choosing to do these activities themselves if they are feeling upset.

### 3.2 Creating peace in my classroom

As an addition or complement to 4.1 below, ask the children if they feel that having a **calm space in the classroom** or school to process feelings or to calm down would be helpful. Ask what activities could be set up in this space.

See if you can set up this space in the classroom. It might be one or a few baskets or cardboard boxes around the classroom with things to touch, manipulate or read. You might put a hula-hoop or other shape or space on the floor that children can sit in if they need some quiet time or space. Let the children choose if they want to go there to calm themselves or relax, as this should not be associated with negative behaviour. If you have a bigger classroom, a space with a plant and something soft to sit on might help.

Children should never be relegated to this space as a punishment. They can be encouraged to spend time in the calming space if they feel they need it. It should be their decision to leave the space. In this sense, we are encouraging them to be self-aware about their own coping mechanisms.



### 3.3 Creating a set of classroom rules

Building on previous activities, as a whole or small group activity, ask children to create rules for the classroom. Once each rule has been created, write them down on a large piece of paper and keep these rules up in the classroom all year long. Refer to them and encourage the children to refer to them during the day.

## 5.A.4 Tools to regulate classroom emotions and behaviour and tools for children to build awareness about, regulate and process their own emotions and experiences

### 4.1. Tension scale

To be used with the calm box, see below in 4.2. The tension scale and calm box are tools for self-awareness and self-regulation.



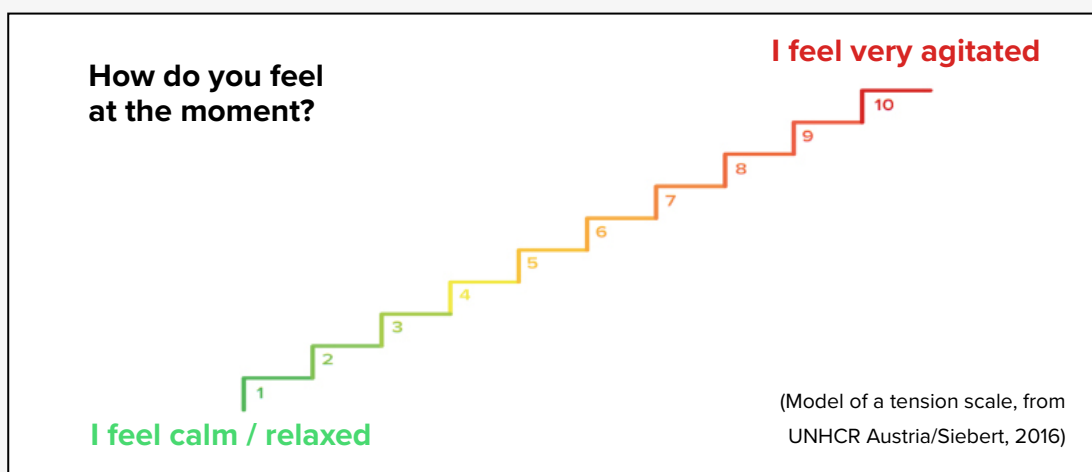
**OBJECTIVES:** Increase students' awareness of their own emotions and internal state and get them to know what they can do to help calm themselves.



**DURATION:** 15 - 20 minutes to set up the tension scale and explain how it works. Ideally two minutes of activity with the tension scale twice each day.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** A large picture, drawing, photo or other display of a tension scale with a classification from 1 to 10 (see model below).



To set up the tension scale, first sit together with the children in your class and **draw up a list of words that express states of tension and emotion**. You can start by listing situations that might evoke certain emotions. “How would you feel if someone hits you?” “How do you feel just before you go to bed?” Use age-appropriate terms that describe these states. The words could also be introduced with actions. You can ask students to **act out the emotions** or the situations. Ensure all students are ready for any ‘extreme actions’. Words that could be put on the list and/or acted out include: nervous, excited, stressed, anxious, aggressive, annoyed, angry, tired, tense, irritated, painful, restless, as well as calm, relaxed, happy, and others. You may use words which you have used before in socio-emotional learning activities (as in previous chapters).

See if, as a class, you can put the words from the list on the scale. Some words may clearly belong at the top, tenser end of the scale (e.g. stressed or anxious). Other words may be put at the bottom, less tense end of the scale (e.g. relaxed or calm). Always make clear to the children that there are no wrong answers.

Take the display of the tension scale, write the words on the appropriate place on the scale (or glue them, pin them or apply in another way). Put the completed tension scale somewhere visible to everyone in the class.

As a class activity, take two minutes to ask the children how they are feeling and whether they can **rate their feelings on the tension scale**. Children could answer, for example, that they are feeling anxious or happy. Ask the children to rate their tension on the scale from 1 to 10, e.g. “I am pretty happy, not sad. I would give myself a 3 out of 10 on the scale”, or “I am feeling very nervous today. I would give myself a 7 out of 10.”

Then **ask what they think is needed to lower tension**. “What do you need to do to come down a level or more?” Students will have their own ideas about what they need to minimise tension. Some will have developed their own ways to calm down. Some may not have. Write these ideas for tension-reducing activities down on cards and use them in the calm box activity (see 4.2 below, the cards will be put in the calm box).

### **Alternative version**

**Lay a rope on the floor and label or imagine a scale you can walk on from 1-10.** When asking the children about their emotions and internal state, ask them to rate themselves by standing on the appropriate level in the rope (e.g. nearer the “10” mark on the rope if they are more tense). This helps students experience “where they are right now” using their gross motor skills.

Once the children have grasped the concept of the scale, give each child peg or pin which they can personalize. As they come in every morning, ask the children to put their **peg or pin** on the tension scale display to show how they are feeling. You could ask them to do this at various points of the day. If you see a child that you believe is stressed or struggling emotionally during the day, you could ask them to rate themselves and see if there are activities in the calm box they would like to undertake.

## 4.2 Calm box



**OBJECTIVES:** To calm students when experiencing elevated levels of stress. If a student has a tendency to dissociate you can use this to help bring them back to the present moment.



**DURATION:** 20 - 30 min to set up the calm box and explain how it works.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** A large box or receptacle, possibly decorated together in the class with children, with a lid. 6 -8 items to fill the box. A calm box is a box or other receptacle in the classroom containing a collection of soothing objects that will help students calm down and re-centre themselves if they are feeling tense. The contents of the calm box should be developed with the children.

### **Class-time introduction:**

Start with a discussion and draw up a list of things that have helped students in difficult situations in the past. Was it a cup of hot chocolate? A toy? Or another object, like a favourite blanket or a piece of music? Ask the students to bring to school any materials they would like to have in the box.

Then ask students to make positive affirmation cards to put in the box. These cards describe actions, memories or other positive experiences to reduce tension, like getting a hug from someone, or to think of memories of a pleasant trip or moment together. Add movement idea cards too, describing actions students can do to release tension (e.g. slow breathing, stretching out, and physical activities like jumping, somersaults, running or other).

### **Putting the box together:**

Put a collection of calm box materials on a table, add the materials brought by students, and cover them with a cloth to hide them from view. Don't forget to add the positive affirmation cards and the movement idea cards, these are essential.

Make sure you have some materials at hand in the classroom in case students cannot think of any materials to bring. Some examples of appropriate materials are:

- Sensory balls, stress balls, softballs, juggling balls
- Pieces of material – silk, wool, soft cloth.
- Chewing gum or strong-tasting sweets (mints).

- Dried fruit, nuts, chocolate or small sweets (e.g. raisins, apricots, almonds, hazelnuts).

Make sure to check for allergies or intolerances and take into account religious eating habits with any of the snacks available.

- Stuffed animals.
- Essential oils: lavender, Japanese mint. Ensure students understand not to put the oil directly onto their skin but to put it on a tissue or clothing to smell.
- Balloons to blow up. Once used, they can be thrown away.
- Sandbags to balance on one's head.
- No medicines.

Make sure the collection of objects is adapted to the group you will be using the calm box with. Remove the cloth from the table and allow children to pick objects and "test" them as they wish. Discuss for each object how it might have an effect and how it may reduce tension.

Fill the box in class together with the students. Place the objects from the table in the box. You may decorate the box together too.

**Throughout regular class-time:**

When students show signs of stress (restlessness, difficulty concentrating, arguing or becoming aggressive, staring into space, etc.) you can first try and use the tension scale with them so they can express their level of tension and suggest themselves how they could release some tension. You can ask questions like: "I see you are getting restless, what number do you feel on the tension scale?" You can encourage them to get something out of the box if they feel that would help.


If the tension is already at level 6 or you can see or feel the student is very tense or struggling to control him- or herself, you can open the calm box together right away and look for something suitable to calm down.

Occasionally a student will have an extremely high tension level, self-identifying at level 7 to 10. In these cases, physical activity may be the only possible remedy. Provide the movement idea cards or offer a walk or run outside if possible


If they do not yet have the self-regulation skills to use the tension scale, you can be pro-active. Simply observe what you see in them and then suggest they take something from the box if they need to calm down.

## 5.A.5 Activities to develop self-control and inhibitory response in children - activities which train the thinking brain to switch on before children react to certain situations

### 5.1. Stop rule

 **OBJECTIVES:** Teach students to know their boundaries and are able to express themselves when others cross that boundary.

 **DURATION:** 15 - 20 minutes for introduction.

 **MATERIALS NEEDED:** A set of printouts, cards or other displays of a stop sign (see model below).



Begin a discussion with the students about things that people might sometimes do in the playground. Think of running, playing football or playing catch. Ask them what you can do when someone becomes too rowdy or starts to annoy others, e.g. by running into them or pushing them in the playground.

**Explain the class rule: if someone does something that interferes with, upsets or hurts another student, that child may say stop.**

If the children want to, they can choose a gesture or a word to demonstrate this, e.g. putting hands up and out in front of them with bent arms, yelling stop. This rule applies whenever a personal boundary is crossed, when a classmate's behaviour is perceived as unpleasant. This can be in the playground, classroom or elsewhere. Talk about how often things like this might occur and ask the children whether they think it is a normal part of life. Speak of these minor infringements (running

into someone, saying something that is not nice) as a normal part of life, and talk about how conflicts, fights and arguments may occur naturally. Emphasise, however, that children are always able to say stop when they are not comfortable.

Divide the children into small groups, and ask them to **act out a situation** where someone needs to say stop. Give the groups cut-outs or cards with the stop sign (see above) so they can start the activity with the sign, and then move on to using the gesture or just an agreed word. Ensure that all the parties playing the “aggressor” stop immediately.

Let students know that if something happens in class or in the playground, they should use the stop rule and then tell an adult if the behaviour continues. Students can also think of examples of possible abuse of the stop rule, for example when a teacher announces homework and someone shouts stop because they do not feel like doing it.

Repeat the exercise in class a few times for the first few weeks and then perhaps once a week. Ask children if they have used the rule in the playground or class, and commend them if they have. Ask them to act out the situations that occurred. They should not name the “aggressor” unless they have agreed to be part of the acting.

## 5.2 ‘1 - 2 - 3’



**OBJECTIVES:** Children increase their awareness of what is occurring at each moment, and are brought back to the here and now through sight, hearing and touch. Children with severe attention problems can develop their ability to concentrate.



**DURATION:** 10 minutes, a few times a week.

**NOTE:** This exercise requires a high level of concentration and can initially overwhelm children who struggle with attention issues.

In a group, ask the children, "What do you see?" Then let them name something out loud. After that, ask, "What do you hear?" Then children must now be very quiet and listen to the sounds in the room. Then ask them what they heard. Now ask, "What do you feel?" The children call out what they perceive using their sense of touch. Do this three times in total. During the second round however, the children must name two things they see, hear and feel, and during the third round, they need to name three things each.

Once all the children have understood the exercise, tell them that it will be much easier for them to notice something when they keep the answers to themselves. Try the same game silently, with no-one calling out what they see, hear and feel.

Explain to the children that they do not need to remember the answers. Children not working in their native language can name things in their own language or even draw pictures.

**Note:** Silence can be scary for some children who have experienced stress and trauma. Keep the exercise short at the beginning, and ensure all children understand that there will be silence.

### 5.3 Teacher's Island



**OBJECTIVES:** Students will develop awareness of personal boundaries and a careful way to deal with these.



**DURATION:** 5 min to introduce but it will remain throughout each day.

Many students may not know or feel their own or others' boundaries. This may lead them to not respect their classmates' personal property, invade others' personal space, and not take care when using other people's property. To make violations of boundaries visible and tangible for younger schoolchildren, you can create a Teacher's Island.

Explain to the children that the Teacher's Island is your area only. It should include your desk and everything on it, as well as anything else you deem important not to touch. For example, nobody should sit on your chair, not even during the break.

Explain that you do not like it when these boundaries are violated. Agree on rules and consequences: anyone who wants to cross these boundaries must ask first. Those who do not comply with this rule will get a small extra task, which you should agree on with the children when introducing the rule.

Children can then go on to define what they believe should be their own personal space. Ask them to discuss in pairs or small groups and then define to the whole class what is theirs.

Open a discussion if you think something they have defined is not realistic or fair.



## 5.A.6. Exercises to improve self-worth, self-confidence and build a positive mind-set

### 6.1 Positives diary



**OBJECTIVES:** To build self-confidence by highlighting moments of joy and achievement.



**DURATION:** 20-30 minutes to introduce, and to be used at different time points throughout the school year.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** One large notebook per class for all students to document experiences.

After a special moment or fun activity, introduce the concept of the notebook and ask students how they experienced the moment. See if they can document the activity in small groups and put the documentation in the notebook. Explain that children can individually choose positive moments and achievements about their school day, and write them in the notebook.

When individual children struggling with trauma or stress conquer a new task, ask them if they would like to record it in the notebook.

Encourage a few children to write down experiences. The memories can be recorded with drawings, cuttings from newspapers or magazines, photos, other arts and crafts.

Once children are familiar with the concept, encourage those who have struggled with trauma and stress to take the notebook and read it every now and again.

If you have time, talk about several of the events with them and see if you can encourage a positive mind set and show how they have developed so positively over the timespan.

## 6.2 Learning diary



**OBJECTIVES:** To focus student attention on moving forward in their academic learning, and help them to become aware of their achievements and challenges.



**DURATION:** 20 minutes at the end of school day or week.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** Prints of the learning diary template for each child (see model below)

What I found interesting:	What was funny:	What was difficult:	What I did well:
The best moment of this week:	What helped me:	What I can do better now:	What I would still like to improve:
What I was able to help with:	What I got praise for:	What distracted me:	What I would like to learn more about:


Explain to all children that they will need to write down and discuss things that took place during the week. Hand out the learning diary sheets and ask children to fill them in. Make clear to the children that they do not need to fill out all the categories if they can't put anything.


If it is easier for you to just talk about the items that need to be put in the diary, or if it is easier to draw pictures, split the children into groups or pairs and do this as an activity together.


The learning diary may indicate to the teacher where individual students' priorities are, or indeed where they are having difficulties. Some will be able to make a note in the "What I was able to help with" field almost every time, while others might complain that there is too little space to write in the "difficulties" field.

See if you can encourage children to take a positive stance towards things they find hard or areas they struggle to fill in, but do not push students to fill something in if they feel unable. It is fine for a field to remain empty for numerous weeks. With gentle encouragement, the student will find a way to fill it in.

### 6.3 Choosing strengths

 **OBJECTIVES:** Encourage students to spend time thinking positively about their classmates and recognize that they have strengths themselves.

 **DURATION:** 10 minutes.

 **MATERIALS NEEDED:** A set of strength cards with words on them, sets of two cards with each student's name (see model for strength cards below).

friendly	polite	team player	helpful
patient	sensitive	inquisitive	courageous
humorous	optimistic	solution-oriented	honest
reliable	diligent	independent	spontaneous
punctual	responsible	concentrated	gifted in ...
dexterous	attentive	tidy	persevering
athletic	pensive	flexible	active
musical	creative	careful	considerate

Put all the strength cards on display in a visible location or on the wall. Add words describing other strengths if your class can think of more words.

Put everyone's names in a bag twice. Everyone in the class picks two names from the bag and needs to choose a strength for each student.


They can discuss these with another student in the class. Check that every student has chosen a kind strength word and can explain why appropriately. Go round the class and let everyone talk about the classmates and the strengths they have.

Later on, you can use the strength cards as the final part in a class trip where students have had a chance to get to know each other differently and might have ideas of new strengths for their classmates.

## 5.A.7 Classroom practices for developing feelings of competency and self-empowerment

In addition to the activities and tools described above, the following classroom practices can help with students' mindfulness and sense of self.


### 7.1 Exercise, movement and brain breaks

 **OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to de-stress and relieve tension during the day, thus improving concentration.

As with the movement cards in the calm box activities, if students feel the need to move their body, offer them an opportunity to do so. They could do a series of squats, jumping jacks or other movements like touching the left elbow to the right and vice versa. You could switch music on and have a class dance which can help re-focus everyone in the classroom.

If there is the option for students to go outside, run and breathe some fresh air, try and offer them that. When you are expecting students to focus with detailed attention for a longer period of time, scheduling in a five minute brain break for everyone can help to keep the students calm, especially those that struggle with concentration issues.

### 7.2 Being seen and heard

 **OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to feel connected at school as if they belong and to build their sense of self-worth.

Sometimes all a student needs is to be understood better by their teachers. If you are able to, try talking to students who you feel are struggling for two minutes each day, about anything a student wants to talk about, for ten days in a row. You can then move on to every other day for one week or so and progressively let the chats become more informal.

(Fisher, D. and Frey, J., September 2016)

### 7.3 Having a role, whatever it is



**OBJECTIVES:** To allow each student to feel engaged and productive during class periods when they might feel less engaged or productive.

Participating in a vocal or other group activity can at times be daunting for a student. Make string necklaces with cards with the words “observer”, “note-taker” or “vocabulary-builder” on them. Make the necklaces available to all students.

Students will be able to take one of these necklaces if they feel they don’t have a role in an activity. When asking for a necklace, they take on a role and become an official note-taker, an observer, or they become a person watching out for new vocabulary that they do not know and can look up later.

In addition, general roles are helpful for children to get an idea of taking responsibility of different things. General roles such as class monitor, dispute mediator, buddy, learning assistant, and mentor for new students help children feel competent and that they are contributing to a wider project.

## 5.B For the secondary school level

Below are a number of games, activities, exercises and pedagogical methods that can be used in the classroom to address the challenges of stress and trauma. They are focused on social emotional learning and developing skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-worth, empowerment, and self-confidence.

In addition, they address how whole class dynamics can impact individual well-being, including topics such as welcoming new arrivals, creating constructive learning environments for all children, and understanding classroom boundaries and behaviour.

### 5.B.1 Activities to help all children understand the experience of new arrivals in the classroom



**OBJECTIVES:** To help create an environment that feels safe for all students.



**DURATION:** 20 minutes



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** Worksheets with an “unintelligible” text and a set of “unintelligible” questions.

#### Learning a new language: secondary

Give each student a worksheet with a text in a language they do not understand. If you want to write an “unintelligible” text yourself, you can generate it by using a random text and scrambling it with this on-line tool: <http://textmechanic.com/text-tools/obfuscation-tools/reverse-text-generator/>.

The worksheet has some questions about the text on the bottom. Ask students to fill out answers to the accompanying questions. Obviously, it will be merely impossible for them to fill in the answers.


After they have done this, take back the papers and pretend to “mark” the questions. Break the class into small groups and ask them to think about why you might have asked this task of them. Bring them into a group discussion.

Ask them to reflect upon the experiences of newcomers who don’t speak the language to their classroom. Ask the students to think of other things that would be different for a newcomer coming to the school, and talk about these together as a class. Consider listing some ideas on a board in the classroom that were generated together about how to be receptive and open to newcomers.


## 5.B.2 Tools to regulate emotions and behaviour in the classroom environment and tools for students to build awareness about, regulate and process their own emotions and experiences

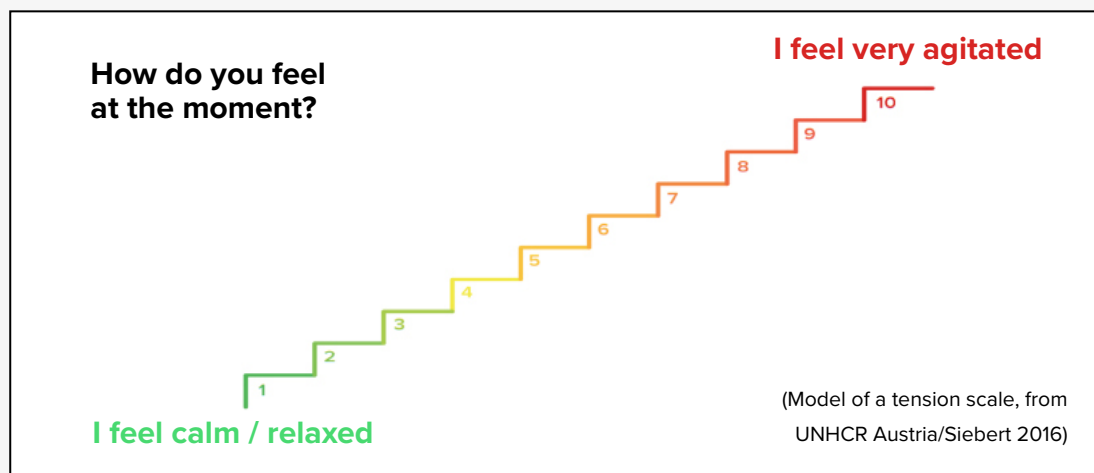
### 2.1. Tension scale

(SIMILAR TO TENSION SCALE FOR THE PRIMARY LEVEL, SEE 5.A.)

 **OBJECTIVES:** Students practice self-awareness. They acquire the ability to recognize their own states of tension based on their behaviour and feelings, and to name them and find ways to cope with them.

 **DURATION:** 15 - 20 minutes to introduce the tension scale.

 **MATERIALS NEEDED:** A large picture, drawing, photo or other display of a tension scale with a classification from 1 to 10 (see model below).



Ask the class “How are you feeling right now? Are you nervous or calm?” Explain to the children that on this scale, 1 means “I am completely relaxed” and 10 means “I feel very nervous and restless, I do not know what to do, I am so tense.” Ask them “At what level are you now?”

Then, introduce some tension emotion-related words to the class (e.g. nervous, excited, stressed, anxious, and annoyed) and ask students if they can think of any more. Ask the students to work in groups to draw up a list of words and see if they can choose where on the tension scale the words should need to be. There are no wrong answers. Write the words on the scale (or attach them in another way) and hang the scale in a clearly visible place.



Ask the question: “Given your answer earlier, what would you need to do to come down a level on the tension scale? ” Students will have their own ideas about what they need to do to minimize tension. Some will have developed their own ways to calm down, some may not have. Write these methods down and use them as the basis for the calm box activity (see 2.2).

Ask the students each morning and during the day if they can rate their tension levels. When you see a student that appears to feel tense or struggling with emotions, ask them to name what level they find themselves at and pair this with the calm box activity to help them feel better.

**Note:** The more practice at using the scale the better one becomes. Encourage students to rate themselves during the day regularly.

## 2.2 Calm box



**OBJECTIVES:** To calm students when experiencing elevated levels of stress. If a student has a tendency to dissociate you can use this to help bring them back to the present moment.



**DURATION:** 20 - 30 min to set up the calm box and explain how it works.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** A large box or receptacle, possibly decorated together in the class with children, with a lid. 6 -8 items to fill the box.

A calm box is a box or other receptacle in the classroom containing a collection of soothing objects that will help students calm down and re-centre themselves if they are feeling tense. The contents of the calm box should be developed with the students or children.

Start with a discussion about what has helped students in difficult situations in the past and make a list of these things. Was it a cup of hot chocolate? A toy? Or another object, like a favourite blanket or a piece of music? Ask the students to bring to school any materials they would like to have in the box. Make sure you have some materials in the classroom in case the students do not bring any.

Then ask students to make positive affirmation cards to put in the box. These cards describe actions, talking about memories or other positive experiences to reduce tension, like getting a hug from someone, or memories of a pleasant trip or moment together.

Add movement idea cards too, describing actions students can do to release tension (e.g. slow breathing, stretching out, and physical activities like jumping, somersaults, running or other).

Bring additional materials, like for example:

- Sensory balls, stress balls, softballs, juggling balls
- Pieces of material – silk, wool, soft cloth.
- Chewing gum or strong-tasting sweets (mints).
- Dried fruit, nuts, chocolate or small sweets (e.g. raisins, apricots, almonds, hazelnuts). **Check for allergies or intolerances and take into account religious eating habits with any of the snacks available.**
- Stuffed animals.
- Essential oils: lavender, Japanese mint. Ensure students understand not to put the oil directly onto their skin but to put it on a tissue or clothing to smell.
- Balloons to blow up. Once used, they can be thrown away.
- Sandbags to balance on one's head.
- No medicines.

Make sure the collection of objects is adapted to the group you will be using the calm box with. Organize a "testing session" in class. Allow students to pick objects from a table and "test" them as they wish. Discuss for each object how it might have an effect and how it may reduce tension.

Fill the box in class together with the students. Place the objects from the table in the box. You may decorate the box together too.

**Throughout regular class-time:**

When students show signs of stress (restlessness, difficulty concentrating, arguing or becoming aggressive, staring into space, etc.) you can first try and use the tension scale with them so they can express their level of tension and suggest themselves how they could release some tension. You can ask questions like: "I see you are getting restless, what number do you feel on the tension scale?" You can encourage them to get something out of the box if they feel that would help.

If the tension is already at level 6 or you can see or feel the student is very tense or struggling to control him- or herself, you can open the calm box together right away and look for something suitable for them to calm down.

Occasionally a student will have an extremely high tension level, self-identifying at level 7 to 10. In these cases, physical activity may be the only possible remedy. Provide the movement idea cards or offer a walk or run outside if possible

If they do not yet have the self-regulation skills to use the tension scale, you can be pro-active. Simply observe what you see in them and then suggest they take something from the box to calm down.

## 5.B.3 Activities to develop self-control and inhibitory response in students - activities which train the thinking brain to switch on before students react physically or emotionally to certain situations

### 3.1. Stop rule



**OBJECTIVES:** Students learn their boundaries, and needs and are able to express themselves when others cross that boundary. Students learn to listen to other's needs and respect them.



**DURATION:** 15 - 20 minutes for introduction.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** NONE

Begin a discussion with the students about things that people might sometimes do in the playground, like running, playing football or playing catch. Ask them what you can do when someone becomes too rowdy or starts to annoy others, e.g. by running into them or pushing them on the playground.

Explain the class rule: if someone does something that interferes with, upsets or hurts another student, that child may say stop.

If the students want, they can choose a gesture to demonstrate this e.g. putting hands up and out in front of them with bent arms. This rule applies whenever a personal boundary is crossed, when a classmate's behaviour is perceived as inappropriate. This can be in the playground, classroom or elsewhere.

Talk about how often things like this might occur and ask whether the students think it is a normal part of life. Speak of these minor infringements (running into someone, saying something that is not nice) as a normal part of life, and talk about how conflicts, fights and arguments may occur naturally. Emphasise however that students are always able to say stop when they feel uncomfortable. Divide the students into small groups and ask them to act out a situation where someone needs to say stop. Ensure all the parties playing the "aggressor" stop immediately.

Let students know that if something happens in class or on the playground, they should use the stop-rule and then tell an adult if the behaviour continues. Students can also think of examples of possible abuse of the stop rule, for example when a teacher announces homework and someone shouts stop because they do not feel like doing it.

Repeat the exercise in class a few times for the first few weeks and then perhaps once a week. Ask students if they have used the rule in the playground or class, and commend them if they have. Ask them to act out the situations that occurred. They should not name the "aggressor" unless they have agreed to be part of the acting.

### 3.2 '1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5'



**OBJECTIVES:** Students increase their awareness of what is occurring at each moment, and are brought back to the present moment through sight, hearing and touch. Students with severe attention problems can develop their ability to concentrate.



**DURATION:** 10-15 minutes and a few times a week if possible.

**NOTE:** This exercise requires a high level of concentration and can initially overwhelm students who struggle with attention issues.

In a group ask the students, “Tell me five things that you see?” and let them name something out loud.

After that, ask: “Tell me five things that you hear?”

The students must now be very quiet and listen to the sounds in the room. Then ask them what they heard.

Now ask, “Tell me five things that you feel?”, and the students call out what they perceive using their sense of touch.

Do this one more time but with the second round, the students must write down what they perceive.

Students not working in their native language can name things in their own language if easier. Try it out silently, without children saying what they perceive.

**Note:** Silence can be scary for some students who have experienced stress and trauma. Keep the exercise short at the beginning and ensure all students understand that there will be silence.

### 3.3 Teacher's Island



**OBJECTIVES:** Students will develop awareness of personal boundaries and a careful way to deal with these.



**DURATION:** 5 min to introduce, but it will remain throughout each day.

Many students may not know or feel their own or others' boundaries. This may lead them to not respect their classmates' personal property, invade others' personal space and not be careful when using other people's property.

Explain to the students that the Teacher's Island is your area only. It should include your desk and everything on it, as well as anything else you deem important not to touch. For example, nobody should sit on your chair, not even during the break.

Explain that you do not like it when these boundaries are violated. Agree on rules and consequences: anyone who wants to cross these boundaries must ask first.

Those who do not comply with this rule will get a small extra task, which you should agree on with the students when introducing the rule.

Students can then also define what they believe should be their own personal space. Ask them to discuss in pairs or small groups and then define to the whole class what is theirs.

Open a discussion if you think something they have defined is not realistic or fair.

If possible, talk with other teachers about doing this activity and the opportunity to make it a school-wide activity.

## 5.B.4 Exercises to improve self-worth, self-confidence and build a positive mind-set

### 4.1 Positives diary



**OBJECTIVES:** To build self-confidence by highlighting moments of joy and achievement.



**DURATION:** 20-30 minutes to introduce, and to be used at different times throughout the school year.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** One large notebook per class for all students to document experiences.

After a special moment or fun activity, introduce the concept of the notebook and ask students how they experienced the moment. See if they can document the activity in small groups and put the documentation in the notebook.

Explain that children can individually choose positive moments and achievements about their school day, and write them in the notebook. When individual children who have struggles with trauma or stress conquer a new task, ask them if they would like to record it in the notebook. Encourage a few children to write down experiences.

The memories can be recorded with drawings, cuttings from newspapers or magazines, photos, other arts and crafts.

Once children are familiar with the concept, encourage those who have struggled with trauma and stress to take the notebook and read it every now and again.

If you have time, talk about several of the events with them and see if you can encourage a positive mind set and show how they have developed so positively over the time-span.

## 4.2 Learning diary



**OBJECTIVES:** To focus student attention on moving forward in their academic learning, and help them to become aware of their achievements and challenges.



**DURATION:** 20 minutes at the end of school day or week.



**MATERIALS NEEDED:** Prints of the learning diary template for each child (see model below)

What I found interesting:	What was funny:	What was difficult:	What I did well:
The best moment of this week:	What helped me:	What I can do better now:	What I would still like to improve:
What I was able to help with:	What I got praise for:	What distracted me:	What I would like to learn more about:


Explain to all children that they will need to write down and discuss things that took place during the week. Hand out the learning diary sheets and ask children to fill them in. Make clear to the children that they do not need to fill out all the categories if they can't put anything.

If it is easier for you to just talk about the items that need to be put in the diary, or if it is easier to draw pictures, split the children into groups or pairs and do this as an activity together.


The learning diary may indicate to the teacher where individual students' priorities are, or indeed where they are having difficulties. Some will be able to make a note in the "What I was able to help with" field almost every time, while others might complain that there is too little space to write in the "difficulties" field.

See if you can encourage children to take a positive stance towards things they find hard or areas they struggle to fill in, but do not push students to fill something in if they feel unable. It is fine for a field to remain empty for numerous weeks. With gentle encouragement, the student will find a way to fill it in.

### 4.3 Choosing strengths

 **OBJECTIVES:** Encourage students to spend time thinking positively about their classmates and recognize that they have strengths themselves.

 **DURATION:** 10 minutes.

 **MATERIALS NEEDED:** A set of strength cards with words on them, sets of two cards with each student's name (see model for strength cards below).

friendly	polite	team player	helpful
patient	sensitive	inquisitive	courageous
humorous	optimistic	solution-oriented	honest
reliable	diligent	independent	spontaneous
punctual	responsible	concentrated	gifted in ...
dexterous	attentive	tidy	persevering
athletic	pensive	flexible	active
musical	creative	careful	considerate

Put all the strength cards on display in a visible location or on the wall. Add words describing other strengths is your class can think of more words.

Put everyone's names in a bag twice. Everyone in the class picks two names from the bag and needs to choose a strength for each student. They can discuss these with another student in the class. Check that every student has chosen a kind strength word and can explain why appropriately. Go round the class and let everyone talk about the classmates and the strengths they have.


Later on, you can use the strength cards as the final part in a class trip where students have had a chance to get to know each other differently and might have ideas of new strengths for their classmates.



## 5.B.5 Classroom practices for regulating class atmosphere and ensuring all students feel engaged and positive

In addition to the above activities and tools, the following classroom practices can help with developing the sense of a positive, capable self in the classroom and in life.

### 5.1 Exercise and movement

 **OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to de-stress and relieve tensions during the day, thus improving concentration.


 **DURATION:** 10 minutes.

As with the movement cards in the calm box activity, if students feel the need to move their body, offer them an opportunity to do so.

They could do a series of squats, jumping jacks or other movements like touching the left elbow to the right and vice versa.

You could switch music on and have a class dance which can help re-focus everyone in the classroom. If there is the option for students to go outside, run and breathe some fresh air, try and offer them that

### 5.2 Brain breaks

 **OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to de-stress and relieve tensions during the day, thus improving concentration.

 **DURATION:** 5 minutes.

When you are expecting students to focus with detailed attention for a longer period of time, scheduling in a five minute brain break for everyone can help to keep the class calm and on task, especially for students who have struggled with stress and trauma. Brain break ideas are could be:

- Paper, scissors, rock; pairs of students play this game together.
- Pictures in the air; ask students to pair up and draw pictures in the air with their finger. Then their partner needs to guess what the picture is.
- Tell a story in a group; students sit in a circle of eight and they each say one word to tell a story. They could also say a whole sentence.

### 5.3 Being seen and heard



**OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to feel connected at school as if they belong and to build their sense of self-worth.

**DURATION:** Two minutes for ten days or two minutes a day for five days.

Sometimes students need to be seen and feel that someone values them. If you are able, try talking to students who you feel are struggling for two minutes each day for ten days in a row (about anything a student wants to talk about).

You can then move on to every other day for one week or so and progressively let the chats become more informal.

### 5.4 Having a role, whatever it is



**OBJECTIVES:** To allow each student to feel engaged and productive during class periods when they might feel less engaged or productive.

Participating in a vocal or other group activity can, at times, be daunting for a student. Make string necklaces with cards with the words “observer”, “note-taker” or “vocabulary-builder” on them.

Make the necklaces available to all students. Students will be able to take one of these necklaces if they feel they don’t have a role in an activity. When asking for a necklace, they take on a role and become an official note-taker, an observer, or they become a person watching out for new vocabulary that they do not know can look up later.

In addition, general roles are helpful for children to get an idea of taking responsibility of different things. General roles such as class monitor, dispute mediator, buddy, learning assistant, and mentor for new students help children feel competent and that they are contributing to a wider project.

## 5.5 Mindfulness activities



**OBJECTIVES:** To give each student a chance to calm down, re-focus and come back to the present moment.

Yoga and meditation offer students opportunities to come back to the present moment. If you have any experience with these, offer them as opportunities for your students when they appear agitated, or even as a daily or weekly activity.

In addition, you can add yoga, meditation or breathing as a card or opportunity to the calm box (see relevant chapters above).

The below exercises are examples of how to start:

- **Count down from 50 with breaths.** Ask students to stand up and move around a little for one minute. Then ask them to stand on the ground, two feet slightly apart.

Ask students to put one hand on their heart and the other hand on their belly. They should close their eyes and begin to count with each inhale down from 50 to 0. This will be challenging at first, so you can start with 10 - 0.

- **Square breaths.** Ask students to imagine drawing a square starting in the bottom left hand corner. They breathe and draw up the left side for a count of three. Then they hold their breath for three seconds and imagine drawing from left to right at the top of the square.

They exhale for a count of three again and imagine drawing the right side of the box down, and then hold out their breath for a count of three as they imagine drawing along the bottom from right to left.

## Appendix

A more complete list of symptoms in children and adolescents that struggle with stress and trauma.

**Young children:** Fear of the dark or of animals; severe restlessness at night; disturbed sleep; bed-wetting or bowel movements even though they were already potty-trained; difficulty speaking; appetite problems (excessive or reduced eating); increased crying or screaming; freezing; shaking; strong fear of being left alone; clinging to the parents; fear of strangers; development setbacks.

**School children:** Recurring thoughts, images, questions; whining; clinging; increased vigilance, startle response; physical over-arousal; restlessness; increased irritability and aggressive behaviour at home and at school; rivalries with siblings over parents' attention; nightmares; fear of the dark; nocturnal restlessness; problems falling and staying asleep; not wanting to go to school; bed-wetting; bowel movements; withdrawing from peers; loss of interests; concentration problems; decreased attention and memory (including learning problems); interpersonal problems at school as a result of restless and aggressive behaviour; behaving like a small child e.g. thumb-sucking; psychosomatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, skin rashes, etc.); eating problems (too much or too little); being unhappy (depression, dejection, sadness); fears relating to safety in areas where they did not feel any fear before; traumatic experiences are repeatedly acted out and drawn; feelings of guilt; risk behaviour.

**Young people:** Sleep disorders; nightmares; recurring memories and thoughts related to the traumatic situation (re-experiencing it); appetite disorders; nausea; increasingly rebellious behaviour; refusing domestic duties and obligations, or excessively responsible behaviour or feeling responsible for the family or other people; problems at school (fights, withdrawal, trying to get attention, skipping school, etc.); decreased concentration, attention, memory and endurance; loss of interests; withdrawal from their group of friends; feelings of loneliness; brooding; fears and panic attacks; psychosomatic complaints; feeling they have no future (sometimes suicidal thoughts); possibly turning to medication, alcohol or drugs for relief; self-harming behaviour; sometimes sexualised and promiscuous behaviour.

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