

Your Role as an Adult Ally



Actions adult allies can take to support authentic student engagement in mental health promotion and learning at school

Creating inclusive, student-centred school environments requires the perspectives and leadership of young people. Understanding student priorities and needs allows for better-informed school mental health planning and programming. Students are not only the target audience for mental health promotion and learning initiatives, but also the best source of information as they have:

- direct access to their peers;
- knowledge of effective mediums to reach their peers; and
- up-to-date information about the challenges their peers face.

Our school systems are not naturally set up to promote student agency and leadership. Instead, they are adult-driven and often seek to maintain a hierarchy, creating a power imbalance. Efforts to amplify student voice and create meaningful opportunities for input about their experiences help disrupt this and offer space for self-agency and student leadership. In the area of mental health, where students have a unique understanding of needs and realities among their peers and a strong desire to share ideas and strategies, there is a wonderful opportunity to involve students in advancing wellness at school. Effective student engagement in mental health promotion and learning requires committed, caring and involved adults who can help gather, support and amplify student voice in meaningful ways.

An **adult ally** is a trusted adult who supports, advocates for and works with young people. They acknowledge their role as a partner with youth, and actively work to:

- create supportive and collaborative spaces;
- put aside biases and assumptions; and
- ensure that the voices and opinions of students are heard, validated, and considered.



The process of being an adult ally requires the active practice of consistent learning, unlearning, reevaluating and reflecting. This resource provides a set of actions and reflective exercises you can do to be an ally for the students you serve.

For further reading on the benefits and characteristics of adult allies and additional considerations when engaging with youth, see: [Adult Ally Tip Sheet](#) (youthhubs.ca). This resource can assist you in obtaining buy-in for a student engagement approach to mental health initiatives and may further support your learning as an adult ally.

Actions of an Adult Ally



01

Reflect on your position

Consider the power dynamic between staff and students in your setting and think about ways to minimize any imbalances in your role as an adult ally. Shifting to working *alongside* students instead of *leading* them first requires you to reflect on your position and acknowledge the power differential that exists. Some questions to consider are:

- How does your role as an adult ally member differ from some of your other roles as a school staff member? What are the similarities and differences?
- What actions or procedures reinforce the power dynamic between staff and students? What actions can you take to minimize this power dynamic in your role as an adult ally?
- Explore and examine your own identity, culture, beliefs, values and attitudes. How do these elements of your social location influence and interact with that of the students you are working alongside?
- What strengths, talents, skills and abilities do you and the students bring to the group? How do they complement each other?
- How can you be a change-agent in your school or board to promote the importance of student engagement in mental health programming and planning? What role do you play in spreading this knowledge and your experiences with your peers?

Consider your own experiences as a young person. Reflect on an adult who had a positive impact on your life, what did they say or do to make a difference? Leaning into those experiences can help you to relate to students and provide you with some common ground.





02 Seek to learn and unlearn

Understand how to support students with diverse intersectional identities that may differ from yours. Educating yourself as you work to become, and be, an adult ally is fundamental. It is important to take initiative to seek out information that will help you better work alongside diverse student populations.

- Cultural sensitivity and anti-oppression training opportunities are helpful first steps to build equitable spaces and unlearn implicit bias.
- Professionals, community leaders and key stakeholders can be helpful resources to consult about specific identities, cultural norms, traditional practices and protocols (e.g., considerations for teamwork).
 - Be mindful of who you consult with for your learning and when. It can require emotional labour from marginalized communities to educate others on racism, discrimination and oppression. Ask for consent and check-in to see if the person has the time and resources to engage.
- Educate yourself – it's not the responsibility of students from marginalized communities to do this for you and burdening them with this responsibility can unintentionally cause harm. There are other great resources to support your learning (e.g., courses, books, podcasts, reputable websites, etc.).
- Not all mistakes are bad; acknowledge them and use your learning as an opportunity to grow. This can help strengthen your relationship as an ally to the students that you work alongside.



03 Create an inclusive, supportive space

Consider both the physical and social environment when bringing students together to ensure that these spaces are welcoming, student-friendly, culturally-appropriate and supportive.

The **physical environment** includes elements such as the room or the virtual platform you are using. Consider the following when designing your physical environment:

In-person

- Is the space easy to get to or find?
- Is the space accessible to people with disabilities?
- Is the space comfortable for students?
- Is the space conducive to group conversations (e.g., easy for everyone to be heard and seen)?
- Are students able to customize the space to make it unique to them (e.g., layout the room, decorate the walls or virtual background)?
- Does the space represent the atmosphere that you are trying to create?
- Are students aware of where to access mental health supports in their school or community?



Virtual

- How can students without adequate internet access participate?
- Is the video conference software available to all students?
- Will students require orientation to the virtual platform?
- Does the meeting time align with students' schedules?

The **social environment** includes the behaviours and interactions among students. Strive to create spaces that are inclusive and affirming of students' identities. Each person brings unique perspectives, experiences and ideas to the group, and each contribution is valuable. Creating an inclusive social environment should be in collaboration with students through developing group norms and expectations.

Consider the following when designing your social environment:

- Does the environment you have created feel psychologically safe for students? (e.g., students feel comfortable to be their **whole** selves and speak honestly without fear of judgment).
- Have students weigh in on what a safe space means for them. Beyond terms like "being respectful" and "listening," prompt students to provide examples of the behaviours and interactions that make them feel safe.
- Develop a set of group norms, led by students that outline the expectations of each member, including adults (e.g., group norms, core values, team contract).
- Are you aware of the pathways for mental health and cultural/faith-based support within your school, board and community? The role of an adult ally is a critical and supportive link between students and the resources they need. Knowing how to respond and where to go when you are concerned for a student's mental health is fundamental to engaging students in mental health initiatives.
- Discuss how to provide and receive feedback, including when someone has been harmed.

For more information on how to build and maintain safer spaces for students in your class, school, board and student group. To help with the early identification of students with mental health concerns, see [ONE-CALL Desk Reference](#) (smho-smso.ca).

Consider your role and boundaries of this role (including when to seek help). Set safe professional boundaries and expectations with students to prevent slipping into a mental health counsellor role or other role outside of your discipline.





04

Determine who is missing

A lack of diverse representation can result in ill-informed, ineffective initiatives. If you have brought together a group of students, aim to have a representative group that amplifies the voices of all students you serve, especially those from communities most disadvantaged and marginalized within your school and board. Look around and ask whose voice is missing. Use these steps to create a plan to remedy the situation:

- Consider the group's purpose and the students you hope to reach; including those voices can help to improve the effectiveness of your plans.
- If available, use your school or board's student well-being outcome data to inform your understanding of which identity groups are experiencing poorer well-being outcomes within your school or board.
- Ask yourself, why certain voices are missing. Are there other spaces where these students feel safer? Has an effort been made to reach these students? Might this be an opportunity to work with other adults with stronger relationships with these students?
- Keep track of retention to identify your group's strengths and weaknesses in terms of lasting student engagement.
- You may also want to involve students in the reflection, understanding their school or board landscape. They may help name perspectives the group lacks and identify areas for improvement.

Recruiting students from an underrepresented or marginalized group to speak on behalf of all other members of that community is not the solution to a lack of representation. Tokenistic practices such as this are harmful; they place a heavy responsibility on students and fail to acknowledge the varying experiences and intersecting identities unique to each student. The purpose of diversity is to ensure that varying perspectives from those who have been most disadvantaged and marginalized are included and valued.





05

Set students up for success

Develop materials and share information that gives students the knowledge necessary to fully participate. As an adult ally, you may need to differentiate the information provided to meet the needs of all students within the group.

- Consider the developmental level of your students to ensure that they are able to understand all materials and information given to them (e.g., consider students requiring accommodations or modifications to fully participate).
- Provide young people with an orientation so that all participants are using everyday language and students have a place of reference.
- Before starting projects, provide students with an overview of the topic and allow for questions throughout.
- Use student-friendly language in your communications and in messaging to broader student populations. Young people are best positioned to speak to their peers and are a great asset in this.
- Decide together what works. Asking students how they would like to be supported through an activity or responsibility is imperative. Here are some ways to start that conversation:

- “How would you like to work through this?”
- “Thanks for taking this on. Would it be helpful if we checked in on [date] to see how things are going?”
- “How about you complete sections 1-3, and we’ll have a check-in to make sure we’re on the same page?”
- “[Student’s name] is interested in graphic design as well; would it be possible for you folks to partner on this project? I think they have some great ideas to add and could learn a lot with your help.”

Outside your group, students lead full lives. Building relationships with students provides you with insight into those lives, which can allow you to personalize their experience (according to their interests, needs, preferences and so on). Beyond your work, sharing opportunities available to students is a great way for them to practice skills and may feed their other interests.

- Break down large goals or tasks into smaller ones. Sometimes big goals can seem overwhelming. Showing students how to break down tasks into manageable pieces can help them stay on task and achieve their goals.

It is important to be transparent about limitations that exist in your school and board when planning mental health initiatives alongside students. When students provide suggestions that are not within these parameters, offer feedback about their idea and suggest accommodations wherever necessary. This will show students that their contributions were heard, considered, but why they were not used.



Your Role in a Student's Circle of Support

Underpinning all of this, is the responsibility you carry as an adult ally to support students' mental health while they engage in mental health promotion and learning initiatives at school. You are part of a student's circle of support: as you work to create a mentally healthy space at school, your collaboration with the mental health support team(s), and the individualized support you provide in the interactions you have with students.

While mental health is a positive focus, personal issues related to mental illness may arise for some students. Consider the following as an ally in a student's circle of support:

- Inform parents/guardians about their child's engagement in these activities, so they can provide needed support at home.
- Have a good level of mental health literacy, know the pathways for mental health and cultural/faith-based support within your school, board and community to connect a student to supports if needed.
- It is good practice to have mental health service lists and helpline numbers on hand, just in case. See [Circle of Support Desk Reference](#) (smho-smso.ca).

Additional Resources

- [Create youth-friendly spaces, Walking the talk: A toolkit for engaging youth in mental health](#) (yetoolkit.ca)
- [Decision support tool for mental health activities](#) (smho-smso.ca)
- [Tips for School Mental Health Professionals for Culturally Responsive Practice in School Mental Health](#) (smho-smso.ca)
- [Understanding Anti-Black Racism to Support Mental Health and Well-Being of Black and Racialized Students](#) (smho-smso.ca)

For a summary of this information, see [5 Tips for Adult Allies](#).

