Teaching, Modeling, and Reinforcing Social and Emotional Competence Remotely During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We can all agree that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing both adults and young people to feel stress, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. The disruptions to normal routines—including school closures and reopening uncertainties, remote learning, and social distancing—create upheaval in students' and families' lives. Families living together without the stress relief that comes from engaging in physical and social activities will inevitably experience a strain in relationships at times. Some may even be pushed beyond their skillfulness to cope in positive ways. Students who thrive on structure and social interaction are dealing with the anxieties of unstructured time and physical isolation. We are not dealing with life as usual, and we all need skills to cope.

In light of these unusual circumstances, we at Lions Quest have created a set of guidelines describing ways to create a relationship-centered learning community and ways to teach, model, and reinforce a set of social and emotional skills as a response to COVID-19. These guidelines

- include some general recommendations for creating a safe, online-learning space to support teachers and students who suddenly find themselves in a remote learning environment.
- are based on teaching, modeling, and reinforcing five core social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making.

Never has SEL been more important to learning and well-being. A caring environment built on social and emotional competence supports educators and students in building skills to express and manage emotions, build empathy, foster connections, and even find ways to thrive in the current circumstances. It is our belief that SEL can serve as a powerful set of practices for navigating change, uncertainty, stress, and even trauma during this challenging time.

Communication in a Remote Classroom

We understand that remote teaching will be a vastly different experience from classroom to classroom and that the way teachers communicate with their students in a remote classroom is the driving force behind the experience. These guidelines acknowledge the two primary methods of communication between teachers and students in a remote classroom: video and audio communication and messaging and other written communication.

Since students are online more frequently as a result of the pandemic . . .

- *Discuss online safety with your students.*
- *Remind students that while your classroom is safe, that safety does not necessarily extend to other online situations.*
- *Encourage students to discuss online use beyond your classroom with a trusted adult.*

Video and Audio Communication

Many teachers are able to use digital tools that include video and audio to communicate with their students. Conferencing and other similar platforms allow students to use video and audio to interact with their teacher and with each other. Conferencing platforms also allow users to share their screen with other users. Many have other useful functionalities such as a gallery feature, polls, and chat/messaging features. Some also allow users to "knock" or "raise a hand" if they would like to speak.

Messaging and Other Written Communication

Many teachers are only able to use digital tools that limit teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction to messaging and other forms of written communication. These tools may include online discussion boards, chat or messaging features, and email. Whether you have access to video and audio communication or not, engaging students in an online discussion is a powerful method for encouraging critical thinking, deep reflection, and a sense of classroom community. In an online discussion, students respond to a prompt in writing using a tool such as chat or a discussion board. Each student's response is visible to the whole class. Students then engage in discussion by responding to at least two of their classmates' responses.

Create a Relationship-Centered Learning Community for Safety and Support

Now more than ever, educators need to build and sustain a relationship-centered learning community—a place where every member feels seen, heard, known, valued, and cared for. This is especially true for students experiencing trauma.

The following practices describe ways to build and sustain a remote relationship-centered learning community that provides safety and support to students.

For some students, school was a place where they experienced structure, safety, and caring adults who welcomed and supported them every day. Since "school" has moved online for many students, creating that safe space is just as important in an online learning community as it is in a physical classroom.

PROVIDE NORMS Because remote learning is new for many teachers and students, it is important to have clear and articulated norms for how thoughts, feelings, concerns, and information are shared. In particular, be aware that COVID-19 is creating almost universal levels of trauma, which require guidelines for keeping learning spaces consistently safe, caring, and responsive. Consider the following when establishing norms for your remote classroom:

- **TRANSLATE PHYSICAL CLASSROOM NORMS** Translate your classroom norms to your online classroom to provide consistency, predictability, and comfort for what could be intense conversations. For example, if your classroom norms usually include expectations for students to be kind and respectful of one another, carry that over into your online classroom. Remind students to be respectful and take turns just like they would in a physical classroom. If students are communicating with each other by messaging or email, remind them that their written messages are just like their spoken words in the classroom.

- **REFER TO NORMS REGULARLY** Refer to the norms on a regular basis as you would in your physical classroom.
- **VIRTUAL HANDS IN THE AIR** Depending on the technology you are using, try to give students a way to virtually raise their hands when they want to speak. Some conferencing tools allow participants to "knock" or "raise a hand" if they want to speak.
- **DISTRICT ONLINE USAGE POLICY** If available, share your district's policy for what is appropriate to be shared online as part of your classroom norms. Remember that most students are not familiar with communicating online for anything other than social pursuits. They will need to be taught how to communicate online effectively, responsibly, and respectfully using the means available to your class.

MAINTAIN AND ESTABLISH RITUALS AND TRADITIONS Maintaining existing rituals and traditions as well as establishing new rituals and traditions will help create a remote, relationship-centered community and will allow students to feel socially connected and emotionally supported. Consider the following when maintaining and establishing rituals and traditions:

- **DAILY MEETINGS** Continue morning/afternoon meetings and other daily rituals in your remote classroom. This will provide students with a connection between your physical classroom and the new remote classroom. It will also allow students time to check in with you and each other about what they are feeling and thinking and could provide opportunities to divert their attention away from COVID-related. topics
- **DAILY FOCUS QUESTIONS** Using centering or focus questions will give students a chance to engage in meaningful discussions. Pose a daily question for students to answer and then encourage students to respond to at least two of their classmates' responses. You can also ask students to post their own questions.
- **VIRTUAL "CIRCLE" PRACTICE** Circle Practice is a research-based and proven practice to help achieve a deep level of classroom safety, trust, and respect. Although students are not sitting in actual circles as they would be in a physical classroom, the sentiment is the same and can be useful in engaging students in a familiar ritual.
- **SMALL GROUPS** Use video conferencing tools to meet with small groups as you would in your physical classroom. Continuing your normal small group meetings will help to build a sense of community.
- **FUN TRADITIONS** If your school has traditions like Fun Friday or Work out Wednesday, modify how those traditions can be honored in a remote classroom. Consider having students suggest activities and use the gallery feature in conferencing platforms that allows everyone to see each other doing exercises or energizers or brain breaks. Use polls or chat features so students can see each other's comments.
- **NEW TRADITIONS** Have students use YouTube or TikTok to safely post fun videos. This is another way to create community and give students something to look forward to and connect with. For example, if a student is having a birthday or another celebration, students can post funny videos with happy birthday messages.

Teach, Model, and Reinforce Social and Emotional Learning Competencies

Social and Emotional Learning skills are essential for coping and thriving in difficult times. The following guidelines describe ways to teach, model, and reinforce specific SEL competencies to build skillful responses to the uncertainties and stress caused by COVID-19.

As you consider how you will teach, model, and reinforce these SEL competencies in your remote classroom, it is equally important to remember that you are also experiencing the negative effects of COVID-19. It is important for you to engage in your own self-care. Not only will doing so safeguard your own health, it will also model those behaviours for your students. Consider what you need to do to take exceptionally good care of yourself emotionally, socially, physically, and psychologically to be at your best for others. Eat well, get plenty of rest, choose some kind of mindfulness or contemplative practice to de-stress, exercise, journal, stay in touch virtually with others, and engage with other practices that contribute to your well-being. Consider virtual gatherings with colleagues to share concerns, make connections, and support each other.

Self-Awareness

DEMONSTRATE MINDFUL PRESENCE When stress, anxiety, fear, and grief are elevated, students need to know that the teachers in their lives are present, available, and ready to provide accurate information and support where needed. Demonstrating a loving, non-judgmental, curious, and calm demeanor has a positive impact because students tend to mirror that behaviour. When you offer empathic listening, patience, presence, caring, curiosity, and genuine interest, students will sense your genuine interest and feel safe to share themselves. These are all behaviours that can be demonstrated in a remote learning environment just as easily as in a physical classroom.

> *Self-Awareness:*
> - *identifying emotions*
> - *recognizing strengths*
> - *building self-confidence*
> - *self-efficacy*

CHECK IN WITH STUDENTS AND INVITE THEIR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS Gently inquire about what is going on in your students' lives. Invite students to share their feelings and thoughts and tell their stories. Some students will come forward and others will need to be encouraged. It is helpful to define and model safe sharing as speaking for yourself and not about those who are not present. Reach out to those who you know may be vulnerable or who may have challenging home situations. Assure them that they are not alone. Let them know that a full range of thoughts and feelings is normal during a crisis. Encourage students to recognize, name, and express their thoughts and feelings, as that helps make them more manageable.

LISTEN AND REFLECT BACK Acknowledge students' thoughts and feelings by paraphrasing what they are saying so that they feel heard. As part of empathic listening, paraphrasing invites students to process how they are feeling and recognize that their feelings are understandable to others. That also creates a comforting feeling that we are all in the same boat, having similar reactions and trying to understand what all of this means for us and others. While audio and video certainly make it easier to paraphrase students' words, teachers can also accomplish this goal by paraphrasing students' written words when responding with written feedback.

ACKNOWLEDGE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND FEARS Try not to steer away from tough questions, concerns, and the expression of fears. COVID-19 is all over the news and social media. That constant stream of potentially upsetting information can cause deep fear and anxiety. Encourage students to express their fears, grief, and other strong feelings by speaking for themselves without quoting misinformation and blaming others. When adults listen to students' fears without glossing over them, you show authentic interest in their reactions and then can respond to their questions with factual information.

Make sure you are accurately informed and ready to educate students knowing the information is evolving all the time. Get information from: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html

Self-Management

BE PREPARED FOR UNEXPECTED RESPONSES When students are under stress and feeling anxious, they are going to say and do impulsive things. Remember not to take any of it personally. Uncertainty can make anyone feel hyper-vigilant and on edge. As a teacher, you may feel fatigue being on guard and unable to predict students' emotional responses in the moment. Notice your own emotional triggers and make an effort to manage them. Stay curious, ask questions, and avoid defensiveness. Always refer back to the classroom norms to keep the learning space safe.

> *Self-Management:*
> - *impulse control*
> - *stress management*
> - *self-regulation*
> - *goal setting*

GUIDE STUDENTS IN BREATH AWARENESS Students need strategies that help them calm down and focus on learning in these challenging times. Breath awareness is a science-based and simple way to calm down. Students can use breath awareness to reduce their heart rate and calm their nervous system when they experience strong emotions and stressful events so they can concentrate on learning. Some breath awareness activities include:

- **COUNTING TO 10** Guide students to breathe deeply while counting to 10. Ask them to slowly and deeply inhale to the count of 5 and exhale to the count of 5.
- **BELLY BREATHING** Have students sit up straight in a comfortable posture and place their hands on their bellies. Ask them to breath in and notice the belly rise. Ask them to breath out and notice the belly fall. Have students repeat ten times and notice what happens in their body and mind. Afterward, talk with students about what they experienced and encourage them to use belly breathing on their own.

Refer to the Lions Quest website for an Introduction to Mindful Breathing designed for grades PK–2, 3–5, and 6–12. Share this and other Mindfulness resources and Family SEL resources with your students' families for use at home: https://www.lionsquest.ca/resources/resource-library/for-everyone/

USE MINDFULNESS PRACTICES Another evidence-based way to help students manage their thoughts and emotions to optimize their learning during stressful times is through mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness is an approach that helps students manage their current stressors, negative thoughts, and worries by paying attention to the present moment, not dwelling on the past, and not worrying about the unknown future. Students learn to observe their thoughts and emotions in the present moment, recognize that they do not have to become attached to them, and let them float by with kindness and curiosity. Typically, mindfulness exercises include breath awareness and a guided meditation that builds awareness of thoughts and feelings. Some examples include:

- **LET IT GO!** Have students imagine that they can put a thought on a balloon and watch it float away.
- **TV REMOTE CONTROL** Have students imagine that the brain is like a remote control that can be used to PAUSE the action when strong thoughts and emotions take over. Pausing the action gives them time to choose a more helpful response to the situation.
- **TRAIN OF THOUGHT** Ask students to imagine that strong emotions come up like a train stopping at a station. They can choose whether or not to get onboard.

Refer to the Lions Quest website for Mindfulness exercises designed for grades PK–2, 3–5, and 6–12. Share these and other Mindfulness resources and Family SEL resources with your students' families for use at home: https://www.lionsquest.ca/resources/resource-library/for-everyone/

Social Awareness

MODEL AND PROMOTE EMPATHY Students need to feel that someone understands what they are feeling and experiencing. Talk about what it means to have empathy with your students. Demonstrate empathy by listening with curiosity and without judgment, paraphrasing what students are saying, and asking questions to clarify. Statements such as *Tell us more about _____* or *_____ must have felt unsettling* show that you are listening

> *Social Awareness:*
> - *perspective-taking*
> - *empathy*
> - *appreciating diversity*
> - *respect for others*

deeply and that you are interested in understanding what students are experiencing. Allow time for students to verify that you heard them correctly and give them the opportunity to restate what they meant if you missed it. This will build a bond of trust and emotional safety with your students. Encourage them to become more empathic with each other as they observe the empathy that you are demonstrating. Acknowledge when you observe their empathic behaviours.

TEACH ABOUT PERSPECTIVE-TAKING Talk with students about being aware of the vastly different experiences that people are having with COVID-19. Some people have been laid off or furloughed while others work or attend school from home. Still others are risking their lives on the front lines. Many people are uncertain about the future. Help students gain perspective about these different realities and have empathy and understanding for all of them.

TEACH ABOUT AVOIDING STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICES, BIASES, AND SCAPEGOATING Emphasize the importance of avoiding stereotypes, prejudices, biases, and scapegoating. During times of crisis, some people become the targets of scapegoating because of stereotypes, prejudices, biases, and misinformation. Have discussions about the difference between fact and opinion and the necessity of gathering reliable information before forming opinions.

ADDRESS HURTFUL AND BIASED BEHAVIOUR ON THE SPOT It is important to speak up against prejudiced, hurtful, biased, and scapegoating language and behaviours whenever you hear and see them. During stressful times, the number of hate-based comments and incidents increase, so interrupt the rhetoric before it escalates. Use a statement such as the following if a student says something biased or hurtful: *When you spoke unkindly about our classmate, I felt upset because I could see that hurt their feelings. Please do not say unkind things about them again.*

If you become aware of specific students who are targeted with blame for COVID-19 or other biased issues, bring this matter to the attention of your school's administrators. Schools, communities, and families must send a unified message to the community at large, stating that bias and scapegoating will not be tolerated. Remind students to support anyone they see being bullied or targeted.

Relationship Skills

BUILD IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION AND REFLECTION Students crave in-person social interaction with teachers and peers, and that has been taken away from them by social distancing, school closures, and stay-at-home orders. When implemented successfully, social engagement can be achieved with remote learning. Social engagement may look different

> *Relationship Skills:*
> - *communication*
> - *social engagement*
> - *relationship building*
> - *teamwork*

depending on how your school is practicing remote learning. Conferencing platforms allow students to use video and audio to interact with you and each other, while other online learning systems may limit teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction to messaging and other forms of written communication. Remind students to be respectful and take turns just like they would in a physical classroom. If students are communicating with each other by messaging or email, remind them that their written words are just like their spoken words in the regular classroom. Consider the following opportunities for social interaction and reflection:

- **ONLINE DISCUSSIONS** Use online discussions to engage students in conversations that facilitate social interaction. Use a chat/messaging feature or discussion board to provide students with a sense of connection and engagement. Use prompts that encourage deep thought or invoke humour and that will elicit varied responses. Once students answer the prompt, have them reply to at least two of their classmates' responses.

- **REFLECTION** Reflection provides students with individual and collective opportunities to think about and make meaning of their experiences and how their experiences will impact their future. Invite all students to contribute and be sure to provide provocative reflection questions at the end of the learning experience. There are many reflection models to choose from. Lions Quest suggests using Terry Bordon's What? So What? Now What? process for critical reflection.

  - *WHAT?* questions invite students to share what happened objectively and non-judgmentally.
  - *SO WHAT?* questions allow students to analyze their experience more deeply to determine what was important and how it connects to their lives and experiences.
  - *NOW WHAT?* questions provide students an opportunity to apply what they have learned and how will they act or think differently.

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING NEEDS WITH EXTRA CARE With the stress of coping with ongoing uncertainty, it's essential to communicate needs and feelings with extra care so that students can hear and not get defensive. A way to do this is by using What, When, Why, and How Messages to help students express their feelings without blame. What, When, Why, and How Messages increase the ability to listen to and meet others' needs. Here are some ways to use What, When, Why, and How Messages:

1. **WHAT** Name the feeling. *I feel _____.*

2. **WHEN** Explain what behaviour is bothering you or what you appreciate. *When you _____.*

3. **WHY** Describe why you are feeling this way. *Because I _____.*

4. **HOW** (Use as an option for a bothering behaviour.) State how you would like the other person to behave in order to better meet your needs. *I wish/I want/It would help if _____.*

Model using What, When, Why, and How Messages when asking for what you need from students and encourage them to demonstrate it as well. For example, you can say: *I am feeling uncertain because this technology is new to me, and I sometimes get frustrated. I hope you can all be flexible while we get used to this.* Your students might use What, When, Why, and How Messages such as the following: *I feel exhausted because the news is on all the time and it makes my stomach hurt. Can we turn it off for a while?*

Responsible Decision Making

PROVIDE INFORMATION AS NEEDED Since experts are learning new information about COVID-19 on an ongoing basis, it is important to stay informed and share accurate, fact-based information. Educate yourself so that you can provide students with up-to-date information about the disease, the health threat, and the prevention and precaution efforts.

Responsible Decision-Making:
- *identifying and solving problems*
- *evaluating*
- *reflecting*
- *ethical responsibility*

Get information from:
Public Health Canada at https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html
The World Health Organization (WHO) at https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus

ENCOURAGE MEDIA LITERACY Direct students to credible sources of information online and teach them to identify sources that are less credible. Invite students to question information if it doesn't come from reliable sources that base their work on science, such as Public Health or WHO. Make sure students are aware of some of the myths that have been spreading about COVID-19 and how it started, especially on social media. This will help students make ethical choices about what they listen to, read, and act upon. Learning the facts can also tap into their empathy and compassion as they recognize how COVID-19 is impacting specific populations more harshly. It is the responsibility of educators to provide accurate information, to talk openly about feelings, to address scapegoating and bias, and to help students be comfortable with the facts.

By creating a safe learning environment and teaching, modeling, and reinforcing SEL competencies during the COVID-19 pandemic, we will be offering to ourselves and our students the most powerful and effective skills and practices for navigating this crisis with skillfulness, kindness, and loving care.