Behavioral Health

RISK FACTORS & WARNING SIGNS:
START THE CONVERSATION

A Resource Guide for Elementary School Staff

For North Dakota Behavioral Health Resource Coordinators

Provided by the Behavioral Health in Education: Resources and Opportunities (B-HERO) Technical Assistance Center
RISK FACTORS & WARNING SIGNS

CONSIDER VARIOUS ELEMENTARY AUDIENCES:

Risk factors and warning signs typically appear differently in elementary students than they appear in teens and adults.

RISK FACTORS are outside factors that can make behavioral health crises more likely to occur. They often stem from environmental, health, or historical circumstances.¹

RISK FACTORS include:
- Prolonged stress, stressful life events, and traumas, such as abuse, neglect, or witnessing abuse of a loved one
- Disasters, such as loss of a loved one or natural disaster
- Poverty and financial crisis
- Exposure to trauma, including trauma related to race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexual identity ²

WARNING SIGNS are observable behaviors or actions that indicate someone could be near a behavioral health crisis. They can appear in someone's talk, behavior, or moods.¹

WARNING SIGNS include:
- Withdrawing from playgroups or friends
- Competing for attention from teachers
- Aggressive behavior
- Being unwilling to leave home
- Becoming less interested in school work ²

¹ A-Train Education: Mental Health Special. Accessible at https://www.atrainceu.com/content/2-warning-signs-and-risk-factors
Explicitly introducing the terms "Risk Factors" and "Warning Signs" to elementary students in grades K-2 may be not be developmentally appropriate, but school personnel can consider the following strategies and activities to help build skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills, four of NDMTSS’s Social and Emotional Learning competencies.

### With Elementary Students in Grades K-2

1. **Provide** age-appropriate vocabulary words for emotions, like happy, sad, hurt, or mad; and lead a class activity that asks students to **identify** which of these feelings they may experience in various situations.

   **For example:**
   - How would you feel if a relative took you out for ice cream? How would you feel if you wanted to get a pet but you were told "no"? How would you feel if someone broke your favorite toy?

2. **Ask students to make** an age-appropriate face to depict a feeling or emotion.

3. **Lead discussions** about positive, age-appropriate ways we can express our feelings, like drawing a picture about how we feel or showing our feelings in the way we dance.

4. **Teach** effective, age-appropriate self-management techniques.

5. **Lead discussions** about who students can reach out to if they need help or advice, like who they can talk to if they feel sad or angry.

6. **Model** age-appropriate ways to seek and offer help, and **encourage** students to seek and offer help in age-appropriate ways, when appropriate.

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To introduce the concepts of "Risk Factors" and "Warning Signs" to elementary students in grades 3-5, consider the following strategies and activities to help build skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills, four of the NDMTSS Social and Emotional Learning competencies.

1) Provide age-appropriate vocabulary words for emotions, like energetic, down/hurt, rejected/disappointed, angry/irate, and lead a class activity that asks students to identify which of these feelings they may experience in various situations.

   For example:
   ○ How would you feel if you got all As on your report card? How would you feel if your pet was very sick?

2) Use a literature selection to have students identify with a time they had the same feelings and how they handled them.

3) Discuss age-appropriate physical and emotional cues of a certain feeling/emotion, such as the cues that help them know what they feel.

4) Lead age-appropriate discussions about using awareness of emotions to guide decision-making, such as helping students think about pausing before making decisions when they are hurt or angry because it is better to make important decisions when feeling calm.

5) Teach effective, age-appropriate self-management techniques.

6) Ask students to reflect on who they can reach out to for help and either write about it in a journal and/or share in a discussion, so that students can learn from their peers.

7) Model age-appropriate ways to seek and offer help, and encourage students to seek and offer help in age-appropriate ways, when appropriate.³
School personnel see students throughout school buildings each and every day, but we may need extra support in starting conversations with students about their behavioral health (and how they show it) on our own.

**PREPARATION IS PERTINENT**

It may be difficult to start conversations about student interventions with elementary students, but here are some resources to increase school personnel knowledge and awareness that can help foster those important discussions.

**Linked above** is a conversation starter for elementary teachers from Mentally Healthy Schools. These conversation starters can be used by school personnel when interacting with students and can be considered to help guide the aforementioned activities!