



## Transcript:

### **Staying Connected with Students and Youth during COVID-19 Part 2: Maintaining Meaningful Teacher-Student Connections in the time of COVID-19**

Presenter: Angela Begres  
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ANN SCHENSKY: We're going to get started today. Again, welcome, everyone, to our webinar, Maintaining Meaningful Teacher-Student Connections During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our speaker today is Angela Begres. This webinar's brought to you by the Great Lakes MHTTC and SAMSHA. The ATTC, MHTTC, and PTTC are funded by SAMSHA, with the following cooperative agreements. The opinions expressed in this webinar are the views of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the official position of DHSS or SAMSHA.

The MHTTC network believes that words matter and uses affirming, respectful, and recovery-oriented language in all activities. There are a couple of housekeeping details. If you're having technical issues today, please individually message either Kristina Spannauer or Stephanie Behlman in the Chat section at the bottom of your screen. And they'll be happy to help you. If you have questions for the speaker, please put them in the Q&A section, also at the bottom of your screen. We will be using automated captioning for the presentation today. A copy of the PowerPoint slides, as well as the recording and any handouts, will be available on the MHTTC website within about two weeks. You will be directed to a link at the end of the survey-- or at the end of the webinar, I'm sorry, for a very brief survey. We'd really appreciate it if you could fill it out. It probably takes about three minutes, and it's how we report back to SAMSHA.

Certificates of attendance will be sent out to all who attend the full session. And they will be sent via email and take about 7 to 10 days. If you would like to see what else we're doing, please follow us on social media. And again, today our speaker is Angela Begres.

Angela is a licensed clinical social worker who did her training at the University of Chicago, where she obtained her MSW. She's an experienced trainer and presenter, contracted both independently and through various nonprofits in the Chicago area, Michigan, and other areas. She has experience integrating mental health education programs into the curriculum for students and staff within the Chicago and West Cook County Public schools. Angela, we're excited to have you, and I'll turn it over to you.



ANGELA BEGRES: Thank you so much. Good afternoon, everyone. It's a pleasure to be here with you today, this Monday. And so we have started the second webinar series. And we've been talking about connections. Today we're going to talk a little bit more specific about how to maintain meaningful teacher-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, we know that many schools have gone back in person or have gone hybrid, or there's different ways in which schools are getting students back into their classroom. And so today I really want to talk about the importance of those relationships and mostly the importance of the social connection in students and the capacity to learn. So before I get started, I'm just curious. I would like to know who's in the room.

So if you can share in with Chat what is your position and kind of what role do you play in your community, whether it is a parent, a teacher, a caregiver, a social worker, any of those. That would be really helpful for me as I move forward. So if you can share that in the Chat, I would really appreciate it. So as those start to come in, I just kind of wanted to go over some of the learning objectives for today. So the focus of today's presentation is to highlight the benefits of developing meaningful connections with students, discuss ways to build students' relationships. And, of course, I always talk about self-care strategies for teachers and other supports.

You may have heard that expression before, about putting our masks on before we can put on the person next to us. And so we need to start thinking of ourselves as well before we can assist our kids or our students. And so I'm going to talk about some of the strategies. And as always, I'm going to ask all of you if you can share with us at the end of this presentation what are some of the strategies that you are using for self-care. It's always helpful to get some more tools that we can add to our toolbox.

So I'm seeing in the Chat who's in the room. I see some school counselors, social emotional learners, so that's really cool. My next presentation in two weeks is going to be all about social and emotional learning. So I love that we have someone here that talks about that. Court designated worker with juvenile services-- really helpful. Director of prevention-- so we have all kinds of people in the room, and that's really great. I also see a school social worker in a Catholic school. So all of this is going to be really helpful for you to bring back to the youth that you are working with.

So I want to check in with you, right? It's Monday. We just had a holiday week. Many of us either come from spring break or are going into spring break. So I want us to just take a minute to ground ourselves and be present at this moment. And so I'm going to ask you to just take a few seconds to check in with yourself. How are you feeling this morning?



And let's just notice our surroundings. What are we seeing around us? Let us notice our breathing a little bit. Let's notice where our attention is at right now. And let's try to just kind of come to this current moment, to the present. Right now I am feeling a little bit exhausted from the weekend. I'm kind of handling a cold. And I'm doing my best to stay here and present with all of you. And so I just want to give you all the time to grab yourself and bring yourself to the present moment.

And if you want to share how you're feeling this morning, I would love to hear that as well. How are you feeling today? It's always helpful to connect with ourselves, to do a daily check-in. Where are my feelings today? Where am I carrying my stress? Maybe even on Mondays, checking in with ourselves and how do we feel to start this week? All of those things are important for our own self-care.

If we're able to label our feelings, we're able to manage our feelings. And we're also the best models for students and kids and children. And so if we're able to model labeling our own emotions, we're also teaching those youth that they can label their emotions as well.

So I see someone says they're feeling relaxed. That's a great way to start the Monday, right, just kind of feeling relaxed. Many of you maybe be are at the end of the day, so looking forward to your afternoon. And I really appreciate you sharing that.

So let's talk about, right? So humans are social creatures and have a deep biological and neurological need for interaction. So it follows that research has found that positive relationships in children's lives play an important role in students' ability to learn and cope.

So really important to highlight this, right? Positive relationships in children's lives are really important and are connected to a student's ability to learn and cope. And that's one important factor. Our relationships are connected to a need to socialize and connect with others.

And we know that just like ourselves, children and youth have really struggled with connections during this pandemic. Many of us have struggled with feeling connected. And we have also become very resilient at finding new and creative ways to build connections virtually with our friends, with our teachers, with our own family.

Now, I'm going to talk a little bit more about the importance of that teacher-student relationship when it comes to positive relationships. So challenges-- oftentimes, some students have challenges when it comes to building relationships with students. And some of the research shows that when there is a negative relationship with teachers, or not a positive relationship, students tend to develop chronic absenteeism.



So we think about chronic absenteeism. It means missing at least 15 days per school year. And this oftentimes leads to young people feeling either wary about coming to school or feeling high levels of anxiety. Many therapists have called chronic absenteeism school refusal. So when youth decide that they have a hard time-- not that they decide. But when youth have a really hard time going to school or staying in school-- and sometimes one of the reasons why they develop this is due to poor relationships not only with teachers, but with the school system itself as well.

Other things that affect the relationship with teachers is poor past experiences, so maybe having a negative experience with someone at school. I've also seen this when I worked in some communities. I've seen that young people not only them having poor experiences, but their parents having poor experiences with school systems and oftentimes that being transferred onto the youth, not wanting to be involved in school, and not having trust for the school system, feeling like people are always out to get them or that they're not treated fairly. And we see these negative relationships most often with low income or people of color.

So oftentimes it is the low income or people of color who tend to have chronic absenteeism or school refusal or poor past experiences with school systems. We also know that behavioral learning disorders can impact relationships for students in the school. Many of the times that is because young people with behavioral learning disorders, obviously, struggle in school, struggle following through with tasks, oftentimes are distracting in the classroom.

But we also know that a student's history follows them. So there is a little bit of teachers passing on that negative history onto other teachers. And so we have to be really mindful of that. And if we do work in a school system, trying our best not to focus so much on those negative behaviors when it comes to learning disorders or behavioral disorders, also noticing this, right?

If we notice that young people are not coming to school, if we notice that young people are talking about maybe having past experienced themselves or their parents, being able to address those strategies for youth and brainstorming what would be something makes that we can utilize to help them build more positive relationships, right? So for people of color, it could be helpful to connect them to other peers of color, being able to provide them maybe more additional resources, being able to provide some supports within the school system. And I'm going to give you a little bit more techniques as we move forward. But it's just important to remember that these are some of the challenges that impact those relationships with teachers and within the school system on its own.

Now, on the other side, there is some really important connections between positive relationships with students. So teacher-student relationships can promote school success in the following ways. So it can strengthen academic achievement.



So if we have positive experiences in school, we are more likely to feel safe and comfortable attending school. And we're more likely to feel encouraged in our academic achievement. Obviously, if we feel safe in schools, and we build positive relationships, we're less likely to be absent from school. We're going to want to show up the school more often. We're going to want to be in the classrooms.

It promotes self-motivation. So those relationships that we build with teachers, staff, individuals from those schools can promote self-motivation. It also strengthens self-regulation.

If we have positive relationships within the school system, we don't take things as threatening. But we also are able to utilize teaching techniques to feel more self-regulated. So those supports that are already in place in school are easier for those young people who feel safe in the school, right? And they're more likely to learn from those. And also those positive relationships can improve goal-making skills.

So how do we assess whether there is a positive student relationship? And one of the ways that we can assess that is through positive engagement, right? How is the young person, how are the students engaging in the school? So how much are they participating in school? What are their future aspirations? What do they look forward to or enjoy in the school?

So if we notice that young people have positive relationships, we may notice that they're engaging more in school, that they're wanting to participate in groups, that they want to participate in sports, that they want to participate in different activities within the school. We also know that those students have positive relationships tend to have more of a positive outlook for their future and their aspirations of the future. So you can see that those positive relationships can make a very severe and important impact in a young person's life.

Now, we probably know this all along, but we also want to acknowledge that COVID-19 has definitely created some notable barriers in those connections the students tend to develop with the teachers then to develop with students. And how? Well, we've talked about this. Even if you attended any of my courses before, we know that COVID-19 has impacted all of our daily routines. Last year, almost a year from now, a year ago, we closed the schools. We closed churches. We closed gyms and activities. And we closed our places of work.

And we ended up changing our daily routines. For us as adults, that was really difficult. And many of you who work with youth also acknowledge that the change in daily routines have been very difficult for you. So COVID-19 has impacted or created some barriers because it has definitely changed young people's daily routines.





Also, we still have a lack of predictability, right? Even for all of us who have gone to some level normal schedule, there's still different COVID outbreaks that are happening in our communities, in different schools, and different places of work. And so there's still a sense of unpredictability.

Other barriers includes increased fear about their safety and the safety of loved ones. As many of you know, I work for private practice. And a lot of the young people that I work with, their fear not necessarily about them having COVID-19 or getting sick with COVID-19. A lot of their fear really comes from what if my mom gets COVID-19? What if my dad gets COVID-19? And many of them who has had loved ones with COVID-19, it is the fear of what if it happens again? Or what if it happens to someone else? And so there's definitely a level of fear.

We also have extended periods of isolation that have impacted students' relationships with the school system. From changing their school routines, to changing how we attend school, to changing how we connect with teachers and our peers, that has really impacted our connections. And it's made all of us, including and especially youth, feel very isolated.

Many people have experienced loss of a loved one. Some have experienced limited access to food and safe shelters. And there's also ongoing safety and security concerns as a result of COVID-19, right? So as a result of spending more time at home, some youth were more exposed to abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence.

So we have to acknowledge this as we're bringing students back into the classroom. As we're bringing students back into a learning environment, we need to have all of these barriers in place, and we have to develop a sense of grace and understanding that some of these barriers is going to make it more difficult for youth to learn because we haven't overcome COVID-19. And so these barriers continue to be placed.

And as we consider bringing students back, school districts will need to think about the impact of these experiences when they're developing their plans for supporting students and not only students, as well as staff. The staff has also experienced some of these barriers. Teachers, administrators, everyone who works in the school system has experienced similar barriers.

So again, how do we prepare to return back to school? And the importance of thinking about and being honest with ourselves that the way we return back to school or the way that we are engaging with school now is different. And we want to be mindful of the different capacities.

So it's important to explore innovative ways to maintain school connectedness, build relationships, and cultivate a positive climate within the



new safety guidelines. Those safety guidelines are changing, I would say, almost daily. And so being flexible to that change is really important. And I think some of the ways that we have all struggled, either if we're teachers or we're parents or we're administrators, we have all struggled with change. And we all struggle with being creative, right? We were so used to our daily routine that it's hard, right? Now we have to make a change, or we have to make an adjustment. But we know that we're capable, and we've seen it with a lot of schools and with a lot of teachers.

So how do we maintain connections? So considering the different ways in which young people are engaging in schools and the different ways in which schools are reopening for the school year, there's different things that we can do to maintain connections with students and with teachers. One way is a sense of community, to create a school and classroom community, no matter where instruction is taking place, maintaining connections virtually and based on social distancing guidelines with students, family, and community partners. So we want to make sure that we continue to build a sense of community. So as much as possible, if students are still at home and we are still educating from our home, bringing the school and the classroom to our virtual settings. If we're going back to school, we know that that also looks different, right?

We're trying to maintain some level of six-foot distance, some social isolation, and some distancing. And so how do we still build community despite wearing masks, despite having to have some level of distancing, despite the fact that we cannot give some youth high fives, or we cannot comfort some youth with a hug. How can we maintain that sense of community?

We also can maintain connection by being positive, right? So prioritize community, staff and students by showing positive actions, behaviors through announcements, social media posts, newsletters, and our bulletin boards. So as a community, we want to make sure that we maintain our community positive, right?

A school that I've been working with, we've been talking about positive affirmations. And it's starting our week with positive affirmations. Some teachers have developed a wall of positive affirmations that students can see in the background. Oftentimes they start the class with connecting by using the social emotional learning. How are you feeling today?

And I'm going to give some more strategies as we move forward. But think about how can we bring something positive into the classroom setting for teachers, as well as for students. Another way that we can keep connections and maintain connections is during the summer, trying to find some ways during the summer months that we can still develop bonds with students, with peers, and with staff.

I know last summer there was one teacher that I read on the news here in Michigan who, because they couldn't close out the school year, she had a



social-distancing picnic during the summer for her-- I think it was a-- kindergarten class, for her kindergarten class. And so thinking about how can we continue to build connections during the summer. Again, the goal here is not to put on more work for teachers or for staff and not to overwhelm students. But we can become creative.

Maybe we send "I hope you enjoy your summer" postcard and personalize it to our students, right? Maybe as a classroom, we write a thank-you card for our teacher. So we can see it doesn't have to be consistent. But we can do something so that our students know that we're thinking about them during the summer and our staff know that we are thinking about them during the summer and that we appreciate them.

Another way to maintain connections during the school year is to build familiarity, right? Young people are used to routine. Young people like things to feel familiar. And a lot of the world right now is feeling unsafe. So how can we build on familiarity? And by doing that, we're also building on safety. So help young children get familiar with the new environments through pictures, social stories, videos of the building or meet and greets with teachers. So students are starting to come back. I don't know about every person that's here, where you're located. I am located in Michigan. And we know that, to some extent, students have been going into schools. But they're going to be starting school four days a week in two weeks. And so a helpful way to integrate students back into the classroom is by maybe sharing with them some pictures of how are we keeping the school sanitized, how are we building real classrooms safety guidelines, how are we building new classroom rules, and just trying to help students recognize what school's going to look like before they even walk into school and also building those connections with the parents. So maybe letting parents know what you would look like coming back to the school system, what the school will look like now following some guidelines.

And so as frequently as we can do that when things change, the more positive those connections are for youth, for teachers, and for parents. Belonging routines, so another thing that we could do is create a classroom motto, a song, a chant, or something that helps the students feel connected and present in the classroom, right? Like I said before, a lot of the schools that I've worked with, they try to create a way to connect with students first thing in the morning or when the students come in.

I know many schools have kind of a homeroom class. And that's where young people get to connect with the teacher. We can check in. I would say this will be helpful to do in as many classrooms as possible, making sure that young people can transition from class to class, have some level of feeling connected to the teacher that's teaching those classes, and also just following a level routine that helps them feel like they belong.





Relationship building, peer personal sharing-- another that's really important and helps with those social emotional skills is allowing ways that young people and students can share about their personal lives in the classroom. So that might be picking, like, a day a month to bring in something special, like a picture, a story. Or if we're still doing a virtual, maybe the student can show us-- do a virtual tour of their favorite part of the house.

And now that it's getting warm outside, we could even say, this week we're going to-- if we're virtual. We're going to all try to meet from our porch, if we have one, or near a window. Try to make some level of connection with the young people and helping them enjoy also the weather and the changes in the weather and the temperature.

And also adjusting to the new requirements such as wearing a mask and making sure there's some covertly wearing those masks. So if schools choose to use masks, add smiles or creative drawings to them when possible. So if we can do any-- and I've seen really awesome masks, really, of people with, like, a smiley face or the clear masks, where you can actually see people's faces.

But I think most importantly when it comes to wearing a mask for teachers and for students, is finding a mask that is really comfortable because everyone is spending a lot of time wearing those masks. And I think that if we don't feel comfortable with it, it can be really hard to be present and to learn and also to talk and communicate and participate, so making sure that masks are comfortable. And if we see young people kind of fussing with their masks a lot, maybe that should be the first thing we address. Hey, is that mask comfortable? Would you like to maybe use one of the school masks to see if that's more helpful? So thinking of making sure that they are comfortable in their learning environment.

And then share projects. So we want to make sure that we can share the projects with the students, so complete a class project together virtually or in person. Assign different sections of the projects that can be pulled together for a final project.

I remember from one class that I took when I was in grad school, our teacher gave us each a puzzle piece. And throughout the semester, we all wrote notes in the puzzle piece. We all wrote reflections on the puzzle piece. And they all had different colors. Like, one side was a place for us to write in. And the other side was colored by the teacher.

And at the end of the semester, we all had to come together with our puzzles and put it together as a big class project. So it was a good thing, but also an individual thing, where we got to put in our own reflections in one side. But at the end of the semester, we had to find the colors that match our puzzle piece and put it together. It was a really good way to build connection for us and also to put kind of termination to the class, kind of conclusion to the class at



the end of the semester. So that's a great idea, something that we can share with our teachers or share with our staff.

So as a result of COVID-19, we know that many of us have experienced some trauma, right? And I think that we have to be mindful about being sensitive to trauma and to trauma practices. So presently all students, staff have experienced a traumatic event due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiencing trauma does not automatically indicate there will be significant impact. So though we want to acknowledge that many of us have experienced trauma, we also want to remember that we all experience trauma differently. So some students will return to school emotionally and physically healthy and ready to learn. While others may return to school facing more difficult circumstances. These students may be in a physiological state that does not feel safe and consequently will not be ready to learn.

So these add another barrier, right? Not only are students coming back to school in different settings, but many of students who are coming back to school will have also experienced a level of trauma that might impact their state of safety. And we want to be sensitive and acknowledge that as well. So let's look about how can we support our students, our staff, ourselves throughout this experience of trauma, and how can we incorporate trauma-sensitive practices in the school. So we always want to start by the professionals, right? We want to start by staff and teachers.

So a good first step is to start incorporating professional development for staff about stress and trauma before the school year begins or throughout the school year, right? Many of us hear trauma often. We know what trauma is. We hear it. We talk about trauma sensitive.

But those things change. And new research comes out. And we want to make sure that teachers and staff are reminded of the importance of trauma-sensitive practices for themselves and for their students. So we also want to enhance self-care spaces. So have a self-care space in the break rooms with items for staff and process for teachers to support each other emotionally while at work.

So know that this is not only impacting students. It's also impacting our teachers that are coming back to school. I'm sure all of you are aware in different states, teachers are having a really hard time coming back to school, right? They're afraid of exposing themselves. Many of them are struggling in getting vaccinated, if they choose to.

So we want to be mindful that a lot of these stressors can be trauma induced. So it can be helpful to create a self-care space for teachers and a process for teachers to support each other. If we have those in place, it's definitely going to create a safer place for the staff, and therefore a safer place for the students.



Other things that we can include in the classrooms is fidgets, right? Create a list of budget-friendly fidgets and prepare staff and students for how this can be used effectively in the classroom. So maybe it's finding a way to get budget for creating the kind of package for each student to have some fidgets that they can utilize in the classrooms, as well as thinking about what are some of the things that teachers need themselves.

Relationship building-- facilitate activities that nurture pre-existing relationships between students and adults and help create new trusting relationships with students. So this is where we become creative. How do we build those relationships? How do we do one-to-one teacher meet-ups? How do we help teachers connect with students individually and with parents? That may be continuing to use virtual settings to do that one-on-one meeting. And in a little bit, I'm going to even provide you all with some sentences or phrases that we can use to connect with you.

Mindfulness is really helpful and important. And it's a great way to, again, acknowledge our feelings, connect with our breathing, and also help us process some of those feelings of trauma. So if possible, facilitate activities that teach skills like mindfulness. Breathing exercise, yoga, or meditation can be taught and practiced as a standalone lesson or incorporated as part of another lesson.

So we can teach our teachers. There was a lot of research a couple of years ago about how a couple of schools took on teaching their staff and teachers mindfulness. And the goal was to teach teachers mindfulness so they could teach that to youth and help them process trauma and also help them learn and be present. And the results of their research was that by teaching teachers mindfulness, not only did it help students, but it helped the teachers themselves.

And that wasn't even what the research was trying to find, right? But that was an added feature, that if we teach teachers these skills, that only are they able to send that over to the students and teach that to students, but the research has shown that it helps teachers be more mindful themselves. And that's a really cool tool to try to incorporate for teachers as part of the professional development, right? The good thing is that now we have learned that virtual settings can be a good way to connect and communicate. And so maybe instead of making teachers stay in the school, maybe we provide a monthly mindfulness class so that they can teach that to students and as a result also, be able to practice mindfulness themselves.

Self-calming-- so we want to make sure that some of the lessons that we provide for students can include some self-calming strategies, practices, strategies, and provide feedback to students, so engaging students in things that would help them self-calm, right? Sometimes as students are coming back to the classrooms, they might feel a lot of anxiety in coming into the classrooms. They may feel a lot of fear to come into the classrooms.



So maybe ask them, how did you manage the fear before? How did you manage the level of anxiety in the past? What can we do?

I had a student who when they told us she was going back to school she became really anxious because she was afraid of taking a test in the class. For the last year, she was able to take tests from home, and she didn't have a specific time to complete the test. And she was fearful that in coming back to school, she would be in a time crunch to complete the test and that was giving her a ton of anxiety.

And so I told her, how about the next test you take, your time yourself at home and see how long it takes you. And then I asked her, in the past, you've been taking tests at home for a while, how long have they taken you? She's like, oh, about, like, 15 to 20 minutes. I'm like, OK, well, how long is the class? She's like, well, about an hour. I'm like, all right. So it sounds like you can do that.

So lets time yourself in the future and see how long it takes you. And then that's going to help you feel a little bit safer going back to school and trying to take the test. So even helping them think about, what were strategies that has helped them in the past and maybe what are some strategies that they can do in the future and allow them to do the problem-solving, not us doing it for them.

There's a couple other ideas that we can utilize, right? Oftentimes students-- so if we have a trusted adult in our life, that's a big protective factor for you. It's the number-one protective factor for you is having one trusted adult. So if a student is having a very hard time adjusting into the school setting, maybe allowing them a time and a schedule to connect with a trusted adult, whether it's at home or at school. Maybe that's giving them an opportunity to send the message to the trusted adult to do a quick FaceTime call.

Sometimes a trusted adult is a different teacher. Maybe a trusted adult is a school social worker. So whenever possible, it's helping the young person identify the trusted adults and make those connections for them, right? And be flexible in allowing them to do that, as well, to connect with youth in that setting-- to connect with a trusted adults in that setting.

Many schools have school counselors. So if we notice that a young person is struggling, maybe we can make a referral for them. Can we connect you to a school counselor? Would you feel safe talking to a school counselor? Can I take you to talk to a school counselor, right? As a teacher or as an administrator, we have a very powerful tool, which it is to notice, notice when our students are struggling, notice when our student, maybe, behavior has shifted, notice when maybe they're falling behind and being able to address it. We have notice this. Can we talk about it? And then how can I connect you? Who can we connect you with, right? If you had a student who came in and was having a stomachache, we would say, hey, go talk to the school nurse.



We've got to do the same thing what we notice that a student is struggling with their mental health, with their mental well-being, make sure that we can make some of those connections.

The earlier we can make any of those connections, the more likely the young person is to overcome some of these things, right? And so as school staff as administrators, as parents, we want to make sure that we notice those things. And then we can talk about it and make connections that are appropriate for them.

And then many youth can benefit from a calm kit, right? We can do that as parents. We can do that as part of a welcoming back to school gift for students if we have the income. We know that that's obviously a challenge and a barrier on its own. But we can create a calm kit with children where they can have things like a fidget, hoodie, paper, and pencil, pipe cleaners, and other things they can use to calm themselves or help regulate their emotions. I have personally asked a lot of parents to have these calm kits for kids that I do therapy with, right? And when they struggle concentrating in a virtual setting, I highly encourage them to use some of these as opposed to maybe use the internet to Google or play a game. So try to make sure that we use some of these things to help young people kind of stay present and active in the classroom. We know that many young people are tactile learners and need to be touching and moving around. And many young people have a lot of energy.

So some of these fidgets and some of these things can be really helpful. I've even heard some people develop-- like, if they have a book or a book bag, they would put some kind of special fabric so that it has a special texture. And then the young person can touch that fabric, and they kind of bring themselves back to the present moment by touching the texture. So there's a lot of ways that we can become creative with youth so that they can be present, especially those youth who have experienced trauma. And utilizing their senses can help them come back to present.

A symptom of trauma is that we disassociate, right? We get distracted in our fear and our thoughts. And so having some of these calm kits can help kids come back to the present.

And then just be mindful with classroom environment, right? Set up the classroom in a manner that is aware of sensory needs, such as dim lighting, reduce smells. Some teachers, some places could be helpful to start a class with, like, calm music. And we can do a lot of things that can be helpful for students.

So how to build relationships with students during COVID-19? Well, like I said, I cannot emphasize enough the strong relationships will be essential to students this academic year. It's crucial for their development, their ability to learn, and their ability to feel connected in the school to have those positive





relationships. And teachers play a significant role in making those connections with students not only the teachers, but so does parents.

Teachers, parents, caregivers are the adults that young people interact with the most. So we want to make sure that we're building those connections with them and that we're helping them feel safe and feel connected and social in this setting. So how do we build those relationships?

Well, maintain weekly or daily check-ins, right? Some ideas are complete a worksheet in which students circle an emoji that describes their current mood. So a simple Google search will help you find so many feelings emoji handouts. I don't know if you've seen this before, but some teachers used to have, before COVID-19, a chart near the door. And students could come in under the name, circle what emoji they're feeling for the day, right? And it was helpful for teachers to kind of assess whether most of their students are in the room right now.

Now, maybe we give each student an individual emoji that they can share. If we're doing virtual, we might have them choose from the window we know. Hey, show us from your emojis what is your feeling today. If we're in the classroom, maybe we give them individual handout with emoji feelings and have them circle one for the week or for Monday. And that helps us as teachers and educators know how the student is doing.

Also, some interesting fact is that teachers and educators have a lot of power into how the classroom's emotions are, right? So if the teacher is having a rough day, she comes in kind of with that energy. What research has shown is that kids tend to respond to that energy. So as teachers, we also want to check in with ourselves weekly and thinking about how am I feeling? And is there anything I can do to regulate my feelings before walking into the classroom on Monday or before walking into a class on Tuesday, just checking in and regulating our own feelings because we tend to impact our students' feelings as well.

Other things that we can do to check in is "thorns and rose." This is a game, in which students share one positive and negative thing about their week. So you might say, all right, to start the day today, how about we share a thorn and a rose, right? And just teach them what this game is about.

Depending on the age, you can get some very interesting answers about this. But again, it's a way for you to assess how the classroom is feeling and maybe even can help guide the learning environment for the day, for the week, or some things that you might need to focus on. It can also identify some of the students who may be experiencing more challenges.

And be creative with engaging students, right? We know that maybe some students are more outspoken and more willing to share. And others are a little bit more shy and afraid to talk up-- or speak up. I'm sorry. So being able to



notice that and connecting with the students that maybe are shy or more likely to be anxious in a private way as opposed to even-- instead of in the whole classroom setting, right? So maybe connecting with those students privately by doing a check-in before the classroom or after the classroom. Noticing that not all students feel comfortable sharing equally and allowing space for different ways to engage with students is really important.

Another way that we can enhance connections with our students is by building up a peer connection value system. So the way of doing this is if we're in a virtual setting, pairing of students together for a couple of minutes before or the first couple of minutes of the classroom and asking them to check in with each other once a week, right? So this is a way not only for teachers to connect, but for students to connect with their peers, which we know they're really struggling with too, continuing to maintain those peer connections. So this buddy system provides the opportunity for students to connect with each other.

And we can do this once a week, right? And it's also helpful to maybe shuffle the system so they can connect with each other and with other classmates. So this will help assemble a greater sense of community and develop social emotional skills for students, right?

One simple idea is to open the video-conference classroom a few minutes earlier to provide students with a chance to talk with each other. A lot of the students that I've worked with are really struggling with making friends or maintaining their friendships because they don't really have time to build on those connections. So doing this buddy system provides the opportunity for them to connect with each other.

When we build a sense of community, it helps us recognize that we're not alone in our experiences, that other people also experience what we're experiencing. And that can create compassion. And so this is a really good way to build social emotional skills, to know that we're not alone in our experience and that we could be compassionate towards each other. So it's another way to build connections for students.

We also want to let students know that we care. So ways to do that-- send them a message. Again, I think teachers are also struggling, and caregivers are also struggling. So be creative on how often we check in with students. But a check-in can always be helpful.

Celebrate successes, so celebrate any milestone. And this can be done by many ways, like positive feedback, digital badges, a funny video. To the extent possible, personalize assignments or let students do so by incorporating students' interests.

So oftentimes teachers might ask students to pick their favorite characters and write a story about them that utilizes all the ways of creating a creative



essay, right? And so that gives them the freedom to pick the topic that they want to write about and utilize what they're learning in the classroom. So these are ways to personalize assignments for youth. I've had some students talk to me about being able to write about their favorite video games. And so there's a lot of ways that we can utilize students' interest and also expand on their ability to learn.

And provide students opportunities to share things about themselves with you and their classmates, right? I've said this already, but maybe a virtual show and tell. And older students could respond to writing problems that allows them to talk about something they love. I've given you some examples about that already.

And then find ways to build engagement. So a joke of the day-- maybe we ask students if they want to be creative sharing a joke of the day. Maybe ask the teachers. Or even if we are working in a school system and have gone to schools where the principal gets in the central thing where they talk really loud and they tell us all a joke, right? So the more teachers and staff and principals and vice principals are engaged, the more we building connection, the more we're creating safety. So not only is this responsibility on the teachers, this is really on the school itself, everyone who takes part in building the school. We can also engage in weekly virtual field trips, daily virtual amusement park rides. There are so many yoga and meditation videos promoted for youth that we can do that can be like a minute, a minute of just stretching in our seat for yoga, a minute of foursquare breathing exercise. It does not have to take that much time.

Mystery reader video calls-- so having different readers call in for a book. It could be parents. It can be teachers. If you have someone that's famous in your community and would be willing to read a book for the community, those are all great ways to create engagement and create something to look forward to for students and that would help them want to attend school and enjoy coming to school.

VIP shot out of the week and virtual spirit week are all different ways that we can enhance connection. I know that we have a couple of school social workers here. I'm sure you guys have heard of virtual play rooms that became really famous during COVID, where you can use a PowerPoint and interactive leagues that students, depending on their age, can be engaged and play video games with you and engage with you in a way that feels like they're in a room. So there's a lot of ways that we can be creative with students that can help feel connected despite being socially distancing or virtual.

So I said earlier that there are some ways that we could engage youth. And this is some of the language that we can use when we are connecting with youth, connecting with parents, connecting with individuals, right? So you can do some probing questions. Tell me more about that. Can you explain a bit more.



You can also communicate caring. Your teacher cares a lot about your success. Your teachers all want to make sure you're getting your needs met. So as parents, we can use some of this language. We want to validate-- validate emotions. I see you, and I hear you.

And then always trying to be solution oriented, right? Oftentimes what happens when our mental health struggles is that we tend to close up. And some youth really haven't tried this, finding their own solutions. So as the adults, we want to make sure that we promote a solution-oriented framework. The next thing I want to talk about is the importance of maintaining connections with parents, right? Like I said before, young people really look up to the adults in their life. And the adults they tend to interact most with is parents and teachers, right?

So if we can have a safe communication with parents and teachers, then young people are more likely to feel safe. I know that when I was a student, there was a lot of teachers in my life that made a huge impact, right? And so we know that teachers can make a big impact in our kid's life. And it is our role as parents to stay connected with teachers.

And so here are some things to keep in mind, right? Don't forget about parents and teachers. Positive connections between parents and teachers have been shown to improve children's academic achievement, social competencies, and emotional well-being. When parents and teachers work as partners, children do better in school.

So how do we do that? Communicate, right? It's a two-way street. We want to make sure that we talk to the teachers, and we let them know which way we prefer to communicate. And maybe ask the teacher, how would you like to communicate with me? How often can I contact you? Here are some things that are important for you to know about my child.

The more we communicate with them in positive ways, the better it is to communicate with them in difficult ways. And that goes both ways, right? As a teacher, it's the same way. Communicate with parents when good things are happening not only when the bad things are coming around.

Consistency-- create a routine at home. As parents, we want to make sure that we have a routine at home. Here's a good time for homework. Here's a time to wake up to go to school so that the same thing happens in school, right? Young people are supposed to follow a routine. So we want to make sure that we maintain consistency.

And then collaborate, a collaborative, cooperative partnership in both planning and problem solving to develop specific positive strategies to help children achieve their highest potential. So collaboration is crucial. Now, there is a cost



of caring. And I know that being a parent, being a staff member, being a teacher is really difficult, and it's even more difficult during this time.

So our self-care is most important. So I'm going to give you some examples of self-care techniques during COVID. And then I want to ask you all, what are you doing for self-health care, right? And you can just share one thing that you've done for self care that's helpful because we can all take those with that and add it to our own self-care.

So we want to make sure that we set boundaries, create a schedule and stick to the schedule and feel comfortable saying no. Gosh, I talk to so many teachers that because they care so much, they're having a very hard time setting boundaries. But therefore their self-care is being impacted, and their ability to function is being impacted. So in order for us to function, we need to set our own boundaries and stick to them.

Recognize and acknowledge your feelings and what is not within your control, right? There's things that we can manage. There's things that we cannot. We cannot change the guidelines and mandates for coming back to school. So we want to make sure that we acknowledge what's within our control and out of our control.

We cannot change our feelings of anxiety or fear. So we want to make sure that we acknowledge and accept those and also think about other positive feelings that come with being able to go back into school. Focus on positive, so keeping a gratitude journal or affirmations, positive affirmations. I've given you some examples. Practicing self care-- again, daily routines, sleeping, eating, drinking, connecting with your loved ones. Connection is just as important for self-care as you sleeping and eating healthy.

Use coping strategies. Ask for support. And complete personal pulse checks. I really like this one. Stop for a minute and check in with yourself. What is working and what isn't working? And I have added this self-care chart to the handout for this presentation. So you guys will get to keep that with us well as access this PowerPoint later on.

So resources-- again, if you notice that you yourself is struggling or some of your students are struggling, there's some really helpful resources. Get familiarized with the resources in your school system. If you're in Michigan, Michigan has a peer-run warmline. So it's peer supports that are able to contact individuals and communicate with them based on their own experiences and just provide a place of relief. The National Helpline, National Institute of Health-- there's a social wellness toolkit that is really, really helpful and connects really well with this presentation. And then the National Suicide Lifeline, Crisis Lifeline and NAMI is a great place for resources if you need them.





Again, some other additional resources we have here-- the Great Lakes MHTCC, they also have a suicide prevention resource guide that can be really helpful. And if you want to stay in touch with me, here's my information. And I would love to open it up for any questions that you all might have.

ANN SCHENSKY: Again, if you have any questions, please put them in the Q&A or the Chat if it's hard to get into the Q&A. I just want to thank you very much, Angela, again, for this very helpful and informative presentation. As the school situation changes so quickly right now, making sure that students, parents, staff are all prepared for what's coming up has been very helpful. So I would like to thank everyone for their time. And again, thank you very much, Angela.

ANGELA BEGRES: No problem. Thank you all for being here.