



Signs of Student Distress and Age-Appropriate Interventions

There are several domains that are helpful to consider when trying to identify students experiencing distress. Student functioning in the following domains should be observed and monitored for changes: **emotional regulation, executive functioning, social skills, behavior regulation, substance use**. This resource reviews signs that signal a student is in distress and provides relevant intervention strategies that educators and school staff can implement. Additional considerations for supporting students in elementary settings and secondary settings are included for each domain.

Definition	Signs of Difficulty/Distress	Strategies	Developmental Considerations for Elementary	Developmental Considerations for Secondary
<p>Emotional Regulation</p> <p>Emotional regulation refers to having the skills to control or manage one's emotions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches Changes in routines or interest in preferred activities Changes in wakefulness, social engagement, attention, or other behavioral patterns Fear, nervousness, sadness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach relaxation strategies (e.g., deep breathing, counting, mindfulness) Facilitate daily mood monitoring Create a safe space or calm down spot Teach positive self-talk Refer to mental health professional Model emotional reasoning and processing Help students identify and understand emotions in real time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May perceive emotional distress as physical problems May benefit from explicit psychoeducation about feelings, thoughts, and behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likely to have insight and be able to discuss issues directly May not disclose challenges, but may display lack of eating or overeating, sleeping too little or too much, or being easily distracted
<p>Executive Functioning</p> <p>Executive functioning includes skills that allow one to plan, focus attention, manage multiple tasks, and attain goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty staying on task or completing tasks with multiple steps Forgetfulness Disorganization Challenges with switching tasks Hyperactivity and impulsivity (e.g., interrupting others, difficulty remaining seated, blurting out answers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pair oral instruction with visual supports Provide repetition of information Create an assignment list or checklist Use a daily planner Allow the use of a digital recorder Chunk assignments or tasks Use a timer Build in breaks Use cues before transitions Offer movement breaks Limit distractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide redirection, modeling, and times to check-in Give control over schedule and tasks gradually – provide scaffolds and supports as scheduling, responsibility, and task management may be new! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage independence and choice in task management and scheduling as possible Check-in and scaffold, but student may feel especially supported if they can lead

Definition	Signs of Distress	Strategies	Developmental Considerations for Elementary	Developmental Considerations for Secondary
<p>Social Skills</p> <p>Social skills refer to the ability to socialize with peers and navigate conflict appropriately.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading social situations or cues inaccurately • Difficulty starting or joining interactions with peers • Difficulty recognizing how their behavior impacts others • Difficulty negotiating conflicts or disagreements • Feelings of loneliness, frustration, sadness, or worry • Misunderstand or feel misunderstood by peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model appropriate interactions • Teach social skills directly using SEL curriculum • Provide opportunities for structured practice of social skills • Reward positive social interaction • Provide feedback about social interactions • Allow for social interactions with varied peers, especially with peers who can model appropriate social interactions • Encourage patience among peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaffold social interactions during unstructured times (e.g., lunch, recess) • Consider assigning classroom jobs to give students opportunities to demonstrate responsibility, teamwork, and leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer leaders may support interventions and provide opportunities for practice • Encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities that provide social opportunities like sports or drama
<p>Behavior Regulation</p> <p>Behavior regulation refers to having the skills to control or manage one's behaviors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May respond to people or situations impulsively • Irritability • Argue with other students and adults • Difficulty following instructions even when willing • Lose temper quickly or often • Engage in physically aggressive behavior • Engage in behaviors that distract or irritate others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set clear expectations for behavior • Recognize environmental triggers • Remain calm and compassionate • Problem-solve situations collaboratively • Create an alternative for when student becomes dysregulated (e.g., break space, mindfulness activities) • Identify a safe space or person • Use de-escalation strategies • Create space for restoration of relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the appropriateness of students needing permission to regulate (e.g., leave the room, disengage from the class activity to do relaxation) and communicate about the safe and expected procedure • Build in self-regulation breaks for all students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk-taking is common among adolescents, so consider long-term consequences and the level of risk when intervening • Support students to gain independence noticing their own triggers and regulation opportunities
<p>Substance Use</p> <p>Substance use describes the use of illegal substances or the misuse of legal substances like alcohol, nicotine, or prescription drugs. Problematic substance use interferes with functioning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained mood swings • Seem confused, anxious, agitated, or withdrawn • Sudden drop in academic performance or motivation • Sudden change in peer groups or relationship quality • Disengagement in activities • Smell of substances on breath or body • Decline in hygiene • Dilated or constricted pupils • Poor physical coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage a healthy replacement behavior • Encourage goal setting and reflection on progress towards dreams • Teach assertiveness and refusal skills • Teach emotion regulation skills • Promote student engagement in healthy relationships with peers and adults • Support social skill development • Use interactive prevention programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on refusal skills and positive coping strategies • Consider involving family members and caregivers in programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical curiosity and experimentation may not indicate intervention • Focus on positive strategies and student choice rather than fear or shame

