

2020 Winter SEL Guide

SEL Support for Students and
Teachers During the Winter Break



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It's been quite a year!

Educators are truly going above and beyond to support students and adapt to our “new normal.” You are working harder than ever before under difficult circumstances. Students and families have also been through a lot this year. Like us, they are dealing with loss and increased stress and anxiety.

We all need time to relax and recharge during the holidays and winter break.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) can help! We've put together this Winter SEL Guide with social-emotional tips, strategies, and activities to support you and your students during the winter break. Included are tips to improve you and your students' social-emotional well-being, cope with loss and grief, and keep academics on track. Also included is advice to help you de-stress over break and create a plan to start the New Year strong.

Need additional ideas or assistance? The social-emotional experts at Aperture Education are here to assist. [Contact us today](#), and we will work with you to create a plan for supporting students and educators through the long winter break.

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10 Tips to Help Students Manage Anxiety and Stress During the Holidays

While holidays can be a welcome break from assignments and school, this year's holiday season will look different due to the pandemic. Many families won't be able to travel or meet in large groups, holiday traditions will be altered, and students may not get to spend time with loved ones. The pandemic has also caused many hardships on families, including financial stress and food insecurity.

Unmanaged stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and can cause harmful physical effects. It can also increase students' risk of dropping out, substance abuse, and suicide. However, educators can help students learn how to effectively manage and reduce stress.

As an educator, you are in a unique position to provide stability and support to your students and their families during the holidays and these uncertain times. One of the best ways you can help students is by looking after their social-emotional health.

Here are 10 ways to help your students learn effective stress management.

1. Help students understand what is happening

A simple and age-appropriate conversation about what is going on and why the holidays might look different this year can help alleviate students' anxiety and stress. Ask students how they are feeling. Listen to them and validate their feelings by telling them it's ok to feel sad, disappointed, or angry. Send home [talking points](#) to help parents talk to their students about what is happening in a constructive way. If you have a school or class web page, keep it current with the latest information about your district's holiday plans and available resources.

2. Promote a growth mindset

[Research](#) shows that a [growth mindset](#) can help students maintain a sense of control over their lives and address the cognitive causes of stress within the brain. Growth mindsets allow us to see the world through a lens of growth, which means we have the power to turn our thoughts from a negative focus induced by stress to a positive focus striving toward improvement. Help students develop a growth mindset by teaching them to focus on the positive and view challenges as opportunities for growth, rather than threats. [Here](#) are some fun, winter-themed activities to help students develop a growth mindset this holiday season.



3. Teach through games

Games are a fun and interactive way to teach students social-emotional skills like self-management, which can equip them to work through stress. Here are a couple of our favorites:

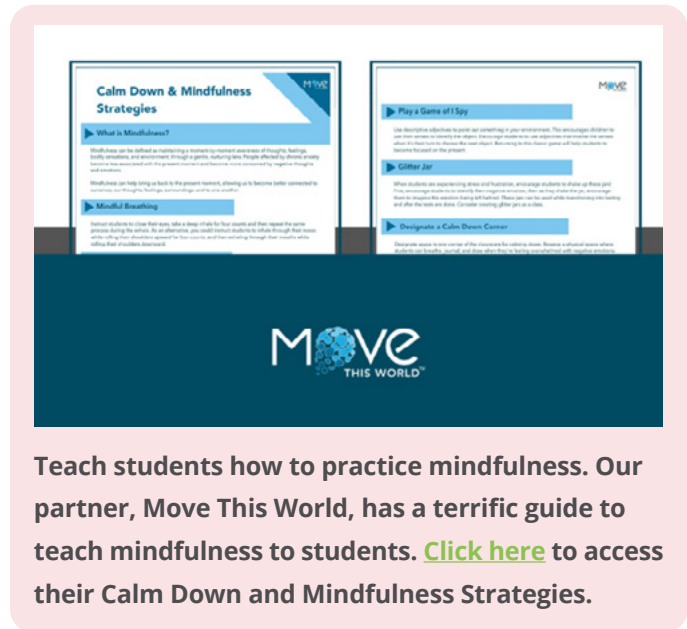
- **Coping Skills Bingo:** This free game teaches students how to manage anger and cope with stress in a fun, interactive way.
- **Stress Management Escape Room:** Students engage in hands-on, interactive puzzles that explain the biological stress response and how to manage stress by getting organized, doing exercises or yoga, relying on social supports, etc.

4. Host morning meetings

Morning meetings are an important way to stay connected (during in-person and virtual learning) with your students and address any issues they may be having. Spend some time at the start of the school day to check in with students. This can be a time to address any issues they may be facing, talk through their feelings and emotions, and practice social-emotional skills. Morning meetings can strengthen student-teacher relationships, increase social awareness and self-efficacy, and reduce stress. Prioritizing these meetings in the weeks leading up to the holidays can give students time to process the fact that things are going to be different this year.

5. Teach mindfulness

We can help students reduce the negative effects of stress through mindfulness. Mindfulness is an awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations and how they can impact your actions. This framework has been proven to help students recognize triggers and changes within their bodies, which can help them calm and regulate their emotions before they act on a trigger in a negative way.



6. Encourage students to get enough sleep

Younger children need 10-12 hours of sleep each night and high school students need around eight to nine hours. Talk to students about why getting enough sleep is important for their physical and mental health.

7. Encourage students to be smart about social media

We are realistic — we know that no matter what adults tell students, there is little chance they will stay off of social media. But we can teach them to be smart about using it. We can help them understand that too much media exposure (especially on social media) can increase stress and anxiety. We can teach them how to access reputable news sources like the Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization to get accurate information. And we can teach them to be safe online. Being smart about using social media can keep students safe and grounded and reduce negative effects like stress and low self-esteem.

8. Practice deep breathing

Deep breathing works just as well for students as it does for adults. It can have a powerful physical effect in reducing tension and relaxing the body — and it can have immediate results. [Clinical research](#) shows that regular deep breathing exercises affect the heart, brain, digestion, and the immune system. They can have immediate results and can also be used to reduce the production of harmful stress hormones. Teach students [deep breathing techniques](#) to calm down and reduce stress.

9. Teach visualization

Daydreaming in class is sometimes ok! Visualization involves using

mental imagery to achieve a more relaxed state of mind and can be an effective way for students to de-stress. This [free lesson plan](#) guides students through the process and has them use visualization to improve reading comprehension.

10. Be a listening ear

Some students don't have an adult at home who they feel they can turn to in times of need. Encourage students to talk to you about their feelings so you can work through any concerns they may have. Keep the communication going during remote learning through email, online chat, or virtual meeting spaces. If possible, continue your outreach during the holidays so students have someone to turn to if they need help.

Our students' resiliency has certainly been tested this year. The holidays will bring a new set of challenges, but you can help your students work through these stressful times by teaching them effective stress management skills. We hope these de-stressing tips are helpful to keep you and your students happy and healthy this holiday season!

Adults have plenty of stress also! Check out our blog, ["4 Tips to Recharge Over Winter Break"](#) to get ideas on how you can relax and recharge over the break.



7 Strategies to Help Students and Families (and You) Cope with Grief

The pandemic has caused loss in everyone's lives. We are all dealing with grief — whether it is the passing of a loved one, sadness from not being able to see family and friends, or the loss of a job or financial security.

Finding ways to cope with grief is especially important right now. Educators are in a unique position to engage with and support students (and each other) during these trying times. And social and emotional learning (SEL)-rooted strategies can help us learn to talk about and begin to work through grief.

Here are seven SEL tips to help you and your students cope with loss and grief.

1. Form a response team

A fundamental part of SEL is that strong relationships can help us work through problems and empower us to achieve, even when faced with adversity. Think about who should be involved in helping students cope with grief and work together so you have consistent messaging. You may involve the school principal, counselors, or nurse, and any other appropriate staff or liaisons. Work together to collaborate on how to talk to students about grief and be sure to lean on each other as you work through your own feelings.

2. Get support from the community

There are many figures and organizations in the community that can provide support to you and your students. Mental health organizations, after school programs, and other community partners typically provide safe and developmentally rich settings for learning and development. Keeping connected to the local community can help students build important social-emotional skills such as self-management and social awareness.

3. Talk with your students and other adults

The simple act of acknowledging and talking through one's fears can go a long way to helping a person cope with loss. It is important to talk about the emotions we are feeling and how they are manifesting. Help students understand their emotions and explain to them that it is normal to feel stress/anxiety, anger, sadness, etc. Then help them find healthy ways to express and work through the emotions. Take care of your own needs by talking to friends, colleagues, mentors, and if needed, a professional counselor.

4. Focus on what you and your students can control

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when we are dealing with loss. There is much uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and this can cause students to play out endless "what-if" scenarios in their minds. Help students focus on what they are able to control. "I can wash my hands." "I can social distance." "I can learn how to participate in virtual settings." Focusing on things we can control will help us increase our self-management, an important skill needed for coping with grief.

5. Stay connected to peers and caring adults

Grief can become overpowering if a person becomes too isolated. Encourage students to share in their grieving with their friends, mentors, educators, and family members. Be sure to keep your own feelings in check through strong connections. Reach out to your colleagues, family, friends, and mental health professionals.

6. Be mindful of cultural differences

Try to be aware of cultural differences in expressions of grief. Ask your students and their families about any cultural or community rituals they would like to follow to support those who've experienced a loss and to honor life. This might include writing letters to the family of the deceased or making a special piece of art to remember the person.

7. Give special care to vulnerable students

For the most vulnerable students, keep in mind that new loss and trauma can cause traumatic events of the past to resurface. Make sure these students receive additional and intensive supports as needed.

Helpful Resources

Below are some resources to help you and your students cope with loss and grief:

[Processing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators](#): The National Association of School Psychologists has provide tips and talking points for helping students work through grief.

Younger students and students with special needs may not yet be able to describe or fully understand their emotions.

[Talking with Children: Message for Parents, School Staff, and Others](#)
[Working with Children](#): The Centers for Disease Control has provided recommendations to help adults talk to children about COVID-19.

[Helping Students Grieve From a Distance](#): This EdWeek article explores the unique challenges of helping students and educators work through grief during the pandemic and social distancing.

[Help for Grieving Students](#): This guide outlines steps and actions school counselors and other educators can take to address grieving students' needs.

We all need to find healthy and effective ways to cope with grief. Creating a plan now will help you stay calm and less overwhelmed during difficult times. SEL can help you and your students begin to cope with grief and loss.

Please note: Teachers are not trained in helping students process and work through grief. Actions a teacher may take to help students cope with grief should not be replaced by formal and/or intensive counseling.



Supporting Families During Winter Break with SEL

It may be the most wonderful time of the year, but winter break and the holiday season also can bring stress and unhappiness for some — and adults are not the only ones affected.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) can support your students and their families during winter break. Reach out to your students' families about the importance of teaching SEL at home and share SEL resources with families.

Here are three ways to get families involved in teaching SEL at home. We've included a helpful holiday-themed activity sheet that you can email to families to help them get started.

1. Help families understand the importance of SEL

Make sure your students' families know what SEL is and why it's important. Let parents know that SEL can help students:

- Stay focused and engaged in learning
- Work through emotions like stress, fear, anxiety, and trauma
- Remain connected with educators and peers
- Achieve academic success

You can share our [SEL FAQ](#) with families to help them learn more about SEL.

2. Share SEL resources families can use at home

A good resource for families to learn about SEL and start building their children's social-emotional skills is our [Parent Portal](#). Here, you can find all the resources you need to support parents, including:

- SEL basics
- Informal conversation scripts about SEL
- A description of the importance of SEL data and the DESSA
- Free SEL growth strategies

SEL Activity Sheet for Families

To make it easy for families to get involved in teaching social-emotional skills at home, we've created an activity sheet that you can email to families before winter break starts. This letter to parents explains what SEL is and includes fun SEL activities that can be done at home.

[Download Now](#)

3. Use Aperture Education's free Growth Strategies

We are committed to helping students and families build SEL at home and are offering select Growth Strategies directly from the DESSA Comprehensive System at no cost.

These resources are easy-to-use and will help students improve their social-emotional skills.

- **Grades K-2:** [Goal Directed Behavior: Working to Make Dreams Come True!](#)
- **Grades 3-5:** [Optimistic Thinking: Home Connection: Encouragement Folders](#)
- **Grades 6-8:** [Relationship Skills: Teacher: Relationship Skills Goals](#)

Helping parents learn about and teach SEL to their children can help make the winter break more merry and bright. Families can be an invaluable resource to continue students' SEL at home.

Get more resources for supporting families during remote learning with our [toolkit to support SEL at home](#).



Learn More

Get even more ideas on how to involve families in teaching SEL at home with our guide, [School-to-Home Connection: Helping Families Build Their Children's SEL Skills](#).

10 SEL Activities for Educators to De-Stress Over Winter Break

Educators, we know you've had a tough year. In addition to the normal stress that comes with teaching, you are also faced with the challenges of online and distance learning, helping students cope with grief and loss, and disruptions to your personal lives. We know these are just a few of the big challenges you are facing.

Now, more than ever, we all need to find ways to effectively manage our stress. If left unchecked, stress can lead to harmful health concerns like anxiety and depression, reduced attention, impaired self-regulation, and decreased learning readiness. It can also lead to negative well-being factors, such as sleep and eating disorders. Chronic stress can also have lasting mental and physical health effects.

This winter break, take some much-needed time to relax and recharge so that you have the energy, well-being, and stamina to begin the new year fresh. Try these 10 de-stressing activities to find out which work best for you.

1. Identify your stress triggers

Stress can be caused by many different factors — long hours, frustrations around technology and virtual learning, too much news exposure, etc. Make a list of all the stressors in your life, noting those you have control over and those you do not. Begin tackling the list by choosing one or two items you have some control over that cause you the most stress. Make a plan to manage the stressor(s), write down a goal, and create accountable measures to help you follow through.

2. Perform deep breathing

Deep breathing can have a powerful physical effect in reducing tension and helping the body relax. [Clinical research](#) shows that regular deep breathing exercises affect the heart, brain, digestion, and the immune system. They can have immediate results and can also be used to reduce the production of harmful stress hormones.

Try the equal breaths exercise. Breath in for a count of four, and out for a count of four. Continue for a few rounds, then try adding an extra count (in for a count of five, out for a count of five). You can continue this exercise until you feel your stress levels decreasing and your heart rate slowing. For more mindfulness exercises, check out [Chopra Center's Instagram feed](#).



3. Get enough sleep

Getting enough sleep is critical to your health and to reducing stress. We know that many folks are experiencing sleep disruptions these days. Try setting an alarm for when it is time for bed and do your best to get seven to eight hours of sleep each night. Most smartphones have a feature that reduces blue light in the evenings — try putting your phone on this setting after 10 p.m. to help your eyes relax. Maximize the sleep you do get by “unplugging” (i.e. turning off the computer, phone, TV, etc.) an hour before bed. You can also turn your phone on airplane mode to avoid any distractions in the middle of the night.

4. Tap into your support network

Establishing a good support network is critical to maintaining healthy stress levels, especially when you are physically isolated. Lean on your colleagues for advice, trade ideas, and create mentoring relationships. Friends and family can also provide invaluable support by lending an ear on especially difficult days. You can further expand your network through [educator-based online support networks and learning communities](#). Join one or more, and share in a wealth of knowledge from educators across the country.

5. Exercise

According to the [Harvard Medical School](#), regular aerobic exercise can boost memory and critical thinking, improve sleep, and reduce anxiety. Find creative ways to exercise while practicing safe social distancing. If you can, go for a 20-minute walk and enjoy some fresh air, or take advantage of a free or discounted [online workout class](#). Regular exercise will do wonders to help you feel more energized and healthier.

6. Strive for healthy food and drink choices

A healthy diet is important for your health and state of mind. Try to eat nutrient-dense, organic foods and cut down on fatty or sugary foods that deplete your energy. Also be sure to drink plenty of water. An estimated 75% of people in the U.S. are chronically dehydrated. A good rule of thumb is to drink eight, eight-ounce glasses of water every day. Try adding citrus or cucumber slices to your water for an extra boost of flavor and nutrients like Vitamin C!

7. Stay organized

Being organized is a proactive way to reduce stress while you work from home. Just think about how much time you waste searching through email or computer files

to find what you need, rewriting misplaced work, or trying to manage your calendars. Set an organization plan — and stick to it — to reduce stress, improve efficiency, and be a more effective educator.

8. Meditate

Meditation, or mindful awareness, can have a tremendous impact on your ability to de-stress. Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years and can bring clarity to your thoughts and promote peace and balance. Even a few minutes of meditation can significantly reduce stress. [Listen to this SEL Chat Podcast](#), presented by Meaghan Dunham, to get tips and tricks for practicing mindfulness and meditation techniques at home during COVID-19.

9. Practice visualization

[Visualization](#) is another effective tactic for reducing stress. To give it a try, sit comfortably and think about a peaceful scene (a beach, the mountains, a favorite spot in your neighborhood). Or, visualize yourself realizing a goal — like finally getting back in the classroom!



10. Laugh

Even during trying times, we need to find humor. It will do wonders for relieving stress. [According to the Mayo Clinic](#), laughter promotes a stronger immune system, increases your ability to cope with difficult situations, and can improve your mood by lessening depression and anxiety. Find ways to laugh every day: Share a funny meme or joke with colleagues and friends or watch a favorite funny movie or television show.

It is important to focus on your health and well-being this winter break. Use the time to take some much-needed time off from the demands of your important job. Give yourself time to relax and recharge during the holidays so you can reduce your stress and anxiety and set yourself up for a successful spring semester.



Promoting Teacher Resilience

Join Aperture Education's Vice President of Research and Development, Paul LeBuffe, in [this engaging webinar](#) designed to support educators by strengthening your resilience.

Watch Now

4 Ways to Start the New Year Strong

Even during normal times, both teachers and students need a kick-start after returning from winter break. The long winter months lie ahead, and there is still a lot of teaching to do. Making a few key changes to your instruction and daily routine will help re-energize both you and your students so you finish the year strong.

Here are a few ideas to increase motivation and create a fresh start after winter break:

1. Change things up

Making a few adjustments to your normal routine can give students a motivational boost when they come back from winter break. You may consider changing the order of your daily lesson plan, implementing a new on-task reward system (i.e. earning points for a prize or extra free time), or starting the school day with [morning meetings](#) (time reserved each day to let students share about what is going on in their lives). If you are teaching students remotely, you can switch up your Zoom background or plan a silly hat day. These simple changes can help increase students' attention and enthusiasm.

Of course, be mindful how changes may impact students with special needs. For example, students with ADHD, autism, or Asperger's Syndrome may have problems with changes to their learning environments or routines. In this case, it may be important to communicate with these students ahead of time. You could even provide them with a daily planner that lists out every activity for the day. They could check off the activity once it is finished, which will help provide a sense of control and clarity.

2. Set new goals

The New Year is a great time to set new goals. Take stock of what students have learned in the first half of the year and assess what still needs to be accomplished. Set new goals based on where students are in their learning, what concepts need additional time, and what material you need to cover for the remainder of the year.

Help students learn how to set goals, too. When students return to class, get them excited about the months ahead by involving them in the planning for the rest of the year. [Here is a helpful article](#) that explains how to teach students effective goal-setting skills, and how this increases their social-emotional competence.

3. Re-assess classroom rules

Involving students in establishing classroom rules and consequences is an important way to gain ownership and buy-in. When students come back from break, take time to re-evaluate classroom rules. You may find that some rules created at the beginning of the year no longer apply, and there may be new rules that need to be established.

4. Bring fresh SEL activities into your daily routine

Freshening up your SEL lessons can breathe new life into your instruction. Start the new term with new SEL activities. Need some ideas? Check out our blog, [16 Social and Emotional Learning Activities](#) for ideas on integrating SEL into core instruction.

Kick off the New Year with a bang by switching up your routine, setting new goals, and updating classroom rules. Also bring fresh SEL activities into your instruction to keep students engaged. Students will be more motivated to learn, and you can stave off the winter teaching blues. Refreshing your routine now will give you the boost you need to finish the year strong.



Conclusion

We hope our Winter SEL Guide helps you and your students have a safe and happy winter break. We all need time to rest, recharge, and prepare to finish the remainder of the school year strong. Teachers, students, and families all need SEL, and strengthening our resilience will help us cope and persevere during these uncertain times. With SEL, we will come out of this pandemic stronger.

We hope you find the activities in this guide helpful. Be sure to take some time to focus on your own well-being. Focusing on self-care during the break will improve your own emotional well-being and help you start the new year fresh.

Aperture Education is committed to developing the social-emotional skills of all students and educators. We invite you to learn more about our [DESSA Comprehensive SEL System](#) and the Educator Social-Emotional Reflection and Training (EdSERT). As always, we are so grateful for your continued dedication to this profession. Our goal is to be your partner in the development of SEL skills for all students, and the incredible staff that support them each day!



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