

Youth Voice: Guidance for Building Relationships as High Schools Launch the 2020-21 School Year

[Children's Hospital Colorado's Mental Health Youth Action Board](#) consists of 15 high school students from across the Denver metro area plus Fort Morgan. They are passionate advocates for youth mental wellness aiming to create more caring, connective, and supportive environments for themselves and their peers. In this challenging time, they have developed guidance on how to “reopen” high schools with an emphasis on relationships and community building during the COVID-19 pandemic and the illumination of racial inequities across the country.

The Why:

Hinkley High School counselors and administrators reached out to their YAB members to co-create a plan with them on returning to school with a focus on social emotional learning, relationship building, and proactive circles. Hinkley YAB leaders were so excited to be engaged in this important work and engaged the whole YAB team in developing this important resource in addition to two of their peers at Hinkley. They developed this [video](#) to share with educators why relationships are so important to launching this new school year with unprecedented challenges.

The How:

- The first couple of weeks need to focus on trust building
- Open the conversation the same way so it establishes a routine and makes it more comfortable for participation.
- Set ground rules/norms for safety and respect with students. Build on the norms for each class, so it's not repetitive. Some ideas to ensure are included are:
 - Be open
 - Be vulnerable, even if that means saying, “I don't know.”
 - Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but not to harm anyone or any group of people
 - Hate will not be tolerated because it damages the safety within the group
 - Everyone is entitled to educate - asking questions is the best tool here - but not to judge/criticize
 - Practice empathy and compassion with the goal of learning and understanding new perspectives
 - Hard on issues, not on people
 - What's shared here, stays here - safe space
- As the facilitator, model vulnerability. Always start to set the tone and share authentically about where you are at to humanize yourself to your students too.
- Be yourself so you can be the same person on the first day and last day of school.
- Be honest about boundaries, especially mandatory reporting. Don't make promises you can't keep.

- The counselors/social worker are available to support you with this on the frontend or backend. If you step into an uncomfortable conversation or you are concerned about any student, reach out to the counselor to discuss/problem-solve, to support your facilitation, and/or to follow-up with students.
- Know that each class will look and feel different and that's OK.

The What:

Introductions & Building Trust

The purpose of carving out this class time is to build relationships, create opportunities for people to share and be more vulnerable. There's no pressure - everyone is different in what they are willing to share and with whom. This should not be graded, rather just an opportunity to connect and create space for the class to get to know each other and support one another during these challenging times.

Start with acknowledging the new reality and be upfront with the plan and the safety rules/routines. Transparency builds trust. Students need to know what to expect to feel safe. They also know and respect that things will change, just be as upfront as possible including about what is still unknown.

When starting with introductions, include asking for preferred names and pronouns and the option to do so privately with the teacher. Have students rename themselves with preferred names and pronouns if you're on an online platform. Walk them through the process.

Acknowledge the COVID reality and that we're all facing the challenges and uncertainty together amidst the social and political context of illuminating racial injustices. The year is going to be tough. And everyone has a different experience based on race, gender, sex, etc. and we need to acknowledge and respect that and learn from each other so we can grow as individuals and as a community. What norms, or commitments to each other, do we need to make in order to ensure we build a safe, inclusive, welcoming classroom where we can build trust to have hard conversations and care to support each other through this challenging time? (See suggested norms above)

Start with easy questions, such as hobbies, music, favorite color, food they'd want to eat for the rest of their life, favorite thing to do during the summer. Or some fun icebreakers, like 2 Truths and a Lie. For more icebreakers, see https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BGLNLXbp3IZ7xEJ6qvLa_cCG_6b509iT3jRWtsOvujs/edit

Some slightly deeper get-to-know-you questions include:

- What do you think are your strengths?
 - What are some of the best things about you?
 - What are you good at doing?
- Are there any values or rules that you try to live by? What do you think is important in life?
- What would you like to try out this year (extracurricular)?
- What is something that you learned this year so far?

Questions that Get to the Heart of the Matter (Week 3ish)

- How has COVID affected you? What has been the rose (bright spot), bud (opportunity), and thorn (challenge) from this time?
- What are ways we can support each other during this time and get through this together a little bit easier?
- What worked for you when we went online at the end of last year?
- What would it take for online/hybrid learning to be successful for you?
- What questions do you have about this year? (Recognize that so much is still unknown for everyone.)

- How are you taking care of yourself today?
- What's a story - from a book, movie, social media, conversation - that you've been gripped by lately? Why did it capture you?
- What habits have you started, or stopped, during safer-at-home?
- Where are you most excited about going to when everything opens up?
- What, if anything, have you realized you don't need during this time?
- What is something that you miss that surprises you? What's something you don't miss that surprises you?
- Who have you been thinking about most during this time? Why?
- What's the most generous act you've seen recently?
- What do you hope we all learn or takeaway from this experience?

Adapted from <https://qz.com/work/1836105/20-great-questions-to-ask-instead-of-how-are-you-doing-right-now/> and <https://www.coloradoinitiative.org/strategic-reopening-collaborative-toolkit/connect/>

Establish a Routine of Care & Community

Check-ins can be simple, like rose/bud/thorn or on a scale of 1 to 10, where is your mental health right now or if your mental health was the weather, what would the forecast be for today? It can be helpful to establish a routine so not catch anyone off guard and allow people to share at their comfort level. It also allows you to note where everyone is at and if you need to follow up individually or in a small group with anyone. Checking in individually builds large amounts of trust with just a quick gesture of “hey, I heard you're only at a 4. What's going on? Anything you want to talk about privately?”

If you notice you're getting the same responses every week, then having a routine question is not effective for your group. Nothing works for every group every time, so be open to some groups needing more variety. If you get stuck, ask for a student to lead with a question that they find interesting to build relationships among the group. Make sure to get a volunteer beforehand and give everyone an opportunity to lead over the course of the semester/year.

Be as Relevant as You Feel Comfortable

Always consider current events and bring them into the check-in, such as:

- Addressing systemic racism, protests, police brutality, inequities with COVID
- Community tragedy
- Politics/elections
- COVID mandates and disappointments

Again, simple works. “I know there have been a lot of protests in our community over the tragic death of Elijah McClain. I want to create space for how you all are feeling about this. We might have different experiences and we all need to respect wherever each other is at with this. The point in sharing is to increase our understanding of what is on each other's hearts and minds before we dive into learning so we can hold a little compassion for one another.”

Above all else – show your care for each student as an individual and how they might be experiencing our world right now. And THANK YOU!!!