Module 4: Classroom management and positive school climate

Objective:
- Provide strategies for fostering a positive classroom environment that discourages bullying.
- Strengthen teacher-student relationships to enhance classroom dynamics.
- Train teachers to incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum.

Summary of content:
- Creating a safe and supportive classroom culture. Teachers envision a bully-free school and identify strategies to achieve it.
- Classroom rules, group work, and seating arrangements to reduce bullying risks.
- Using social-emotional learning (SEL) to cultivate empathy.
- Preventive classroom strategies for de-escalating conflicts early

Lessons:
Lesson 1. Creating a safe and supportive classroom culture
Lesson 2. Classroom rules, group work, and seating arrangements to reduce bullying risks
Lesson 3. How to cultivate empathy
Lesson 4. Preventive classroom strategies for de-escalating conflicts early

Lesson 1. Creating a safe and supportive classroom culture

According to research by Wang, Berry, and Swearer (2013), students who perceive their classroom as supportive and inclusive are less likely to engage in bullying behaviors and more likely to help peers who are being bullied. A positive classroom culture reduces the risk of bullying by fostering respect and promoting social-emotional growth.

What are the components of a safe and supportive classroom?

As research by Hamre and Pianta (2006) highlights, teachers who develop strong, trusting relationships with students contribute to a classroom climate where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment. Positive interactions help students feel valued and secure, reducing the likelihood of bullying and promoting respectful behavior.

Well-structured classrooms help students feel secure, understand expectations, and reduce opportunities for bullying. As research by Allen (1995) demonstrates, well-organized classrooms where rules are clear and consistently enforced result in fewer behavioral issues and improved student engagement. See more information in Module 5.

Teachers can use Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to foster emotional intelligence, enabling students to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts peacefully. Durlak et al. (2011) found that SEL programs improve students' social-emotional skills, leading to reduced levels of aggression and higher prosocial behavior. For more information on how to incorporate SEL in you classroom, please consult Module 5.

O'Brennan et al. (2014) found that inclusive classroom climates where diversity is embraced contribute to lower levels of conflict and improved student relations. When students feel that their cultural backgrounds are respected, they are more likely to participate positively and less likely to engage in bullying behavior.

Cooperative learning and peer support systems can foster a sense of community and reduce bullying by promoting positive peer interactions. Group work that emphasizes collaboration teaches students to work together respectfully and resolve conflicts constructively. Johnson and Johnson (1989) showed that cooperative learning experiences reduce competition and foster positive interdependence, which in turn decreases bullying behaviors.

Strategies for teachers

1. **Active monitoring and early intervention***:* Implement active supervision during breaks and transitions between classes. Pay attention to social dynamics and intervene early when conflicts arise. Equip students with strategies to de-escalate conflicts independently, such as using "I-statements" or taking timeouts before reacting emotionally (O'Brennan et al., 2014).

"I-statements" are a communication tool that encourages adolescents to express their feelings and needs in a non-confrontational way, helping to reduce conflict and promote constructive dialogue. "I-statements" are structured to allow the speaker to focus on their own feelings and experiences, rather than blaming or accusing others. This reduces defensiveness in the listener and opens up space for productive conversations. The typical format of an "I-statement" is:

- I feel [emotion]
- When [situation or behavior]
- Because [reason or impact]
- I need [desired outcome or resolution]

For example:"I feel upset when you interrupt me because it makes me feel like my ideas aren't important. I need you to give me a chance to finish speaking."

Examples of scenarios with and without "I-statements":
Scenario 1: An adolescent is upset because a group member isn't contributing equally to a project.

- Without "I-statement": "You never help out with the project, and now we're all going to fail because of you!"
- With "I-statement": "I feel frustrated when the group work isn't shared equally because it makes me feel like I'm doing everything alone. I need us to split the tasks more fairly."

The "I-statement" here reduces the likelihood of escalating the conflict and instead encourages a solution-focused discussion about fair task distribution.

Scenario 2: An adolescent feels hurt because a close friend is spending more time with a new group of friends.

- Without "I-statement": "You're ditching me for other people!"
- With "I-statement": "I feel sad when we don't spend as much time together because I miss hanging out with you. I'd like us to find more time to hang out."

In this situation, the "I-statement" helps the adolescent express their emotions without blaming the friend, opening up the conversation for better understanding and resolution.

Scenario 3: An adolescent feels like their parents are too controlling about their schoolwork.

- Without "I-statement": "You're always on my case about homework, and it's so annoying!"
- With "I-statement": "I feel stressed when I'm reminded about my homework because it makes me feel like you don't trust me to handle it. I need more space to manage my work on my own."

Using "I-statements" in this scenario helps the adolescent express their frustration while communicating their need for autonomy in a more respectful and constructive way.

Taking timeouts before reacting emotionally

Start by explaining that strong emotions, like anger or frustration, can lead to reactions we might later regret. Let students know that taking a timeout gives them space to calm down and think clearly. You can discuss real-life examples of how taking a pause can prevent conflicts from escalating: "When you're really upset, your brain doesn't always think clearly, and you might say or do something you don't mean. Taking a timeout can help you cool down and figure out a better way to handle the situation."

The 5-step "Pause and reflect" process:
- Notice the emotion: Encourage students to become aware of when they are starting to feel overwhelmed or angry.
- Signal for a timeout: Teach students to recognize when they need to take a step back (e.g., by counting to 10, saying "I need a minute," or taking a deep breath).
- Step away: Physically remove themselves from the situation (e.g., walk to a quiet space, the back of the classroom, or just take a few steps back).
- Reflect: Use this time to think about what caused the reaction and how they can respond constructively.

- Return and re-engage: After calming down, return to the situation with a clearer mind and use respectful communication (e.g., using "I-statements" or discussing the issue calmly).

Practice this in class with role-playing scenarios, where students act out conflict situations, take a timeout, and return to resolve the issue using reflective techniques.

2. **Continuous feedback and reflection**

Periodically ask students to complete anonymous surveys about the classroom climate. Use this feedback to make adjustments that improve the overall environment. As a teacher, you can also have a classroom journal where you jot down observations about student behavior and classroom dynamics. Reflecting on these observations can help teachers identify areas for improvement (Allen, 1995), that allow for proper interventions.

3. **Encourage a culture of accountability**

Students should feel responsible not only for their own behavior but also for maintaining a positive and safe classroom environment for their peers.

Assign students different responsibilities within the classroom, such as managing group projects, leading class meetings, or overseeing certain classroom activities. This instills a sense of ownership and accountability.

Create classroom agreements where students pledge to follow certain rules, support their classmates, and uphold a positive learning environment. These agreements should be posted publicly and referred to regularly. See **Annex 3** for an example.

Lesson 2. Classroom rules, group work, and seating arrangements to reduce bullying risks

Classroom management plays a pivotal role in creating a safe and inclusive environment that minimizes the risk of bullying. Effective management strategies, including well-defined classroom rules, thoughtful group work, and seating arrangements, can help mitigate bullying risks by promoting cooperation, respect, and inclusion.

Clasroom rules – The 3 Cs (clear, collaborative, and consistent)

Clear and consistent rules help create a predictable environment where students know what behavior is expected of them. According to Allen (1995), classrooms with well-established rules tend to have fewer behavioral issues because students understand the consequences of their actions.

Involve students in creating classroom rules. This collaborative process helps students feel ownership of the rules, increasing the likelihood they will follow them. When students contribute to setting expectations, they are more likely to hold themselves and their peers accountable (Wang, Berry, & Swearer, 2013).

Examples of positive classroom rules:
- We treat each other with respect.
- We use kind and inclusive language.
- We resolve conflicts peacefully.
- We support each other's learning by working together.
- We ask for help when we need it.

Teachers must consistently enforce these rules. Students need to see that both positive and negative behaviors are noticed and addressed in a fair manner. This consistency helps build trust between students and the teacher, fostering a sense of security in the classroom (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Furlong, 2014).

What can teachers do when rules are not respected?

Before addressing non-compliance, ensure that the rules are clearly understood by all students. If a student is breaking a rule, it may be due to confusion or a lack of clarity regarding expectations.

- Start by revisiting the specific rule that was broken to ensure the student understands why their behavior was inappropriate.
- Engage the student in a discussion to explore if there was any misunderstanding or if they found the rule difficult to follow. This not only reinforces the rule but also gives the student a chance to express their perspective.
- Ensure that the same consequences are applied for all students who break the same rule. Develop a tiered system of consequences where initial violations are met with warnings or small corrective actions, and repeated violations result in more serious interventions. For example, A first-time disruption may lead to a verbal reminder, while repeated disruptions may result in temporary loss of privileges or a discussion with the teacher during recess.
- Use restorative practices when appropriate. After an incident, invite the student to participate in a conversation that focuses on the impact of their behavior on others. Ask the student how their actions affected their peers and what they can do to make amends. Encourage the student to take an action to make amends for their behavior. This could involve an apology, repairing something they damaged, or helping out in the classroom as a way to contribute positively.
- While consequences are important, positive reinforcement of good behavior is equally important. Recognizing and rewarding students when they follow the rules motivates them to continue behaving appropriately and models good behavior for their peers. When students demonstrate positive behavior, provide specific praise that highlights what they

did well. For example, instead of a general "good job," say, "I appreciate how you waited your turn to speak during our group discussion."

- When a student repeatedly breaks rules, schedule a private conversation to explore why the behavior is happening. This check-in helps the student feel heard and provides insight into any external factors contributing to their behavior.
- If the behavior is linked to academic difficulties, social challenges, or emotional distress, offer additional support. This could include tutoring, peer mentoring, or counseling.
- After addressing a rule violation, it's essential to restore the positive classroom environment. Lead a brief class discussion (without singling out the individual) to reflect on how everyone can work together to maintain a positive learning environment. Encourage students to share how they feel and what they can do to support one another. Revisit the classroom rules with the entire class, using positive language to reaffirm everyone's commitment to following the expectations.

Group work – why does it matter?

Group work provides an opportunity for students to develop social skills, build empathy, and learn to collaborate. However, without thoughtful planning, group activities can sometimes increase bullying or exclusion. Research by Johnson and Johnson (1989) found that cooperative learning structures reduce competition and foster positive peer interactions, which can mitigate bullying.

Strategies for successful group work:
- Group students with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and social circles. This not only promotes inclusivity but also prevents social cliques from dominating group dynamics. Encourage students to appreciate each other's strengths
- Assign each student a specific role within the group (e.g., leader, note-taker, timekeeper). This ensures that all students are equally engaged in the task, reducing opportunities for exclusion or dominance by a single student.
- Use peer evaluations to encourage accountability. Students can reflect on how well they worked together, offering feedback on what went well and how the group could improve. This reflection process helps students take responsibility for their behavior during group work (Durlak et al., 2011).

Seating arrangements

Strategically designed seating can prevent social isolation, encourage positive peer interactions, and create an environment where bullying is less likely to occur. According to Wang et al. (2020), the physical setup of a classroom plays a key role in students' sense of belonging and safety.

Strategies for effective seating arrangements:

- Regularly changing seating arrangements ensures that students have the opportunity to interact with different peers throughout the year.
- Pair students strategically, ensuring that no one feels left out. For example, pairing students who are new to the class with those who are more socially integrated can help newcomers feel more included.
- Arrange desks in a circle during discussions to promote equality. In circular seating, every student has equal visibility and an opportunity to contribute to the conversation, reducing the likelihood of students feeling marginalized.

Discussion/reflection questions:
- What are the benefits of rotating group members regularly in terms of preventing social isolation?
- What is your own experience with the strategies suggested in this lesson? What might you do different in the future taking into account what you have learned during this module so far?

Lesson 3. How to cultivate empathy

The lesson aims to provide practical tools for integrating empathy-building activities into daily school life. First of all, you need to be aware that there are multiple empathy components that can be addressed in a classroom setting:
- Cognitive empathy: Understanding another person's perspective or situation. For example, discussing how a peer might feel when excluded from group activities.
- Emotional empathy: Feeling what another person is experiencing emotionally. For example, encourage students to reflect on times when they felt left out and how they overcame it.
- Empathic Action: Taking steps to support or help someone in need. For example, pairing students as "kindness buddies" to offer help to peers struggling with tasks.

How can a teacher enhance these empathy components in a classroom setting?

Model empathy: Students learn empathy by observing how adults treat others. When teachers demonstrate kindness, patience, and understanding, students are more likely to emulate these behaviors. To do that, you ca use active listening during interactions with students. Validate students' emotions by acknowledging their feelings. For example, "I see you're upset about this assignment. Let's talk about what's challenging and find a solution together."
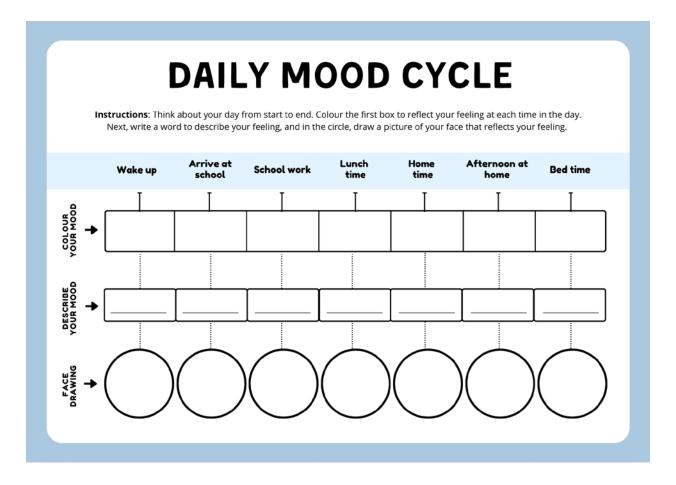
Integrate empathy into the curriculum: If you teach literature or a certain language, you can use books and stories that highlight themes of compassion and understanding. Students can receive assignments to create essays on empathy-related skills. If you teach social sciences or history,

explore historical events or cultural differences to help students understand others' experiences. Compare the perspectives of different groups during significant historical moments and discuss how empathy could have changed outcomes.

Conduct perspective-taking activities: Use stories, role-play, or group discussions to teach empathy, helping students consider different perspectives and learn to respect others' feelings.
- Choose a relatable scenario for the class, such as a disagreement between friends or someone feeling left out during a group project.
- Prepare character cards with brief descriptions of the roles (e.g., "Student A: Feels upset because they weren't included in a game," "Student B: Didn't realise they left Student A out").
- Assign students to roles and ask them to act out the situation. Encourage them to use phrases like, I feel…"or "I didn't mean
- After the role-play, guide a group discussion: "How do you think Student A felt?
- Why?" "What could Student B do to make the situation better?

Daily mood meter: Use a visual tool like a "Mood meter" where students can assess their feelings each day, providing an opportunity to regularly discuss emotions and develop strategies for managing difficult feelings, such as frustration, which can lead to bullying behaviours.

DAILY MOOD CYCLE

Instructions: Think about your day from start to end. Colour the first box to reflect your feeling at each time in the day. Next, write a word to describe your feeling, and in the circle, draw a picture of your face that reflects your feeling.

	Wake up	Arrive at school	School work	Lunch time	Home time	Afternoon at home	Bed time
COLOUR YOUR MOOD							
DESCRIBE YOUR MOOD							
FACE DRAWING							

Lesson 4. Preventive classroom strategies for de-escalating conflicts early

Preventive strategies help educators address potential triggers of conflict before they escalate. Research highlights the impact of a positive classroom climate on student behaviour and learning outcomes (Wubbels et al., 2012). By creating an environment of mutual respect and open communication, teachers can significantly reduce the likelihood of conflicts.

1. Establish clear expectations

Teachers should clearly define behavioural expectations and rules at the beginning of the academic term. These should be co-created with students to ensure buy-in and understanding. Co-created expectations empower students to take ownership of their behaviour and provide a shared reference for resolving disputes (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).

Example: A secondary school teacher, Ms. A, uses a collaborative approach by engaging her students in creating a "Classroom charter." This document outlines agreed-upon behaviours, such as listening when others speak and respecting personal space.

2. Model appropriate behaviour

Teachers can model calm, respectful, and constructive responses to stress and conflict. Modelling demonstrates effective conflict resolution strategies and sets behavioural standards (Bandura, 1977).

Example: When faced with a disruptive student, Mr. Andrews uses a low, calm tone and reframes the student's concerns rather than reacting defensively.

3.Create structured classroom activities

Unstructured time can lead to boredom, frustration, and eventual conflict. Develop lesson plans with clear objectives and transitions to keep students focused. Use cooperative learning techniques where students work together in small groups to achieve shared goals. Provide a variety of activities that cater to different learning styles and abilities to maintain interest and inclusion.

For example, in her math class, Mrs. T uses a group-based activity where students work in teams to solve math puzzles. She rotates roles within groups to ensure that all students feel included and valued.

4.Foster positive relationships

A classroom built on strong, positive relationships is less likely to experience frequent conflicts. Greet students at the door with a smile, check in with students regularly, asking about their well-being or interests. Acknowledge and celebrate small successes, such as improved participation or kindness toward peers.

5.Safe space for communication

Students are more likely to express their concerns and resolve issues constructively when they feel safe to speak openly. Set aside a designated "talk time" where students can share concerns without judgment. Create anonymous feedback systems for students to voice worries they may not feel comfortable sharing publicly. For example, Ms. R creates a "calm corner" in her classroom where students can write anonymous notes about issues they're facing. She reviews these notes regularly and addresses recurring concerns in class meetings.

Activity: Which strategies did you already used and which strategies you believe you might implement in the near future?

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Annex 3. Our pledge to a positive and supportive classroom environment

We, the students of [Classroom Name], pledge to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment where everyone feels respected and valued. Together, we commit to following these rules and supporting one another in our journey to learn and grow.

1. Respect for everyone

- We will treat our classmates, teachers, and school staff with kindness and respect, regardless of their background, opinions, or beliefs.
- We will listen when others are speaking, allowing everyone a chance to be heard.
- We will use respectful language, both in and out of the classroom.

2. Support our classmates

- We pledge to help each other in our learning, offering support and encouragement when a classmate is struggling.
- We will work as a team during group activities, making sure everyone feels included and valued.
- If we see a classmate being treated unfairly or unkindly, we will stand up for them or seek help from a teacher or mediator.

3. Speak up and resolve conflicts peacefully

- We will express our thoughts and feelings using "I-statements" and other respectful communication tools.
- If conflicts arise, we will use peaceful problem-solving strategies, like talking it out or asking for help from a peer mediator.
- We understand that disagreements are natural, but we will work together to resolve them in a way that is fair and respectful to everyone involved.

4. Take responsibility for our actions

- We take responsibility for our words, actions, and behavior, and understand that our choices affect the classroom community.
- We will admit when we make mistakes and do our best to make things right, whether through apologies or corrective actions.
- We will be accountable for following the rules and expectations of the classroom.

5. Create a safe and inclusive space

- We pledge to keep our classroom a safe space where everyone feels welcome and accepted.

- We will celebrate diversity and be open to learning about and appreciating different cultures, identities, and viewpoints.
- We understand that bullying, teasing, or excluding others will not be tolerated, and we will do our part to make sure everyone feels included.

6. Strive for excellence

- We will give our best effort in all activities, whether in academic tasks, group projects, or personal growth.
- We will encourage one another to succeed and celebrate each other's achievements, knowing that everyone's success benefits the entire class.
- We will take pride in our work, be open to feedback, and continuously aim to improve.

Our commitment

By signing this agreement, we commit to upholding these rules every day, working together to create a classroom where we all feel respected, supported, and empowered to learn.

Signatures:

Student Signatures:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Teacher Signature:

- _____

This agreement will be posted in our classroom as a reminder of our commitment to one another. We will review and reflect on our agreement regularly to ensure we are maintaining a positive, safe, and supportive learning environment.

How to use this agreement: the RPRC principle

1. **Review regularly**: At the beginning of each term or when conflicts arise, revisit the agreement to remind students of their collective responsibility.
2. **Public posting**: Display the agreement in a prominent place in the classroom where it can be seen daily.
3. **Reflection**: Have periodic discussions about how well the class is following the agreement, celebrating successes and addressing challenges.
4. **Collaborative updates**: Allow students to suggest updates or revisions to the agreement as the class grows and changes throughout the year. This keeps the agreement relevant and meaningful to the students.