



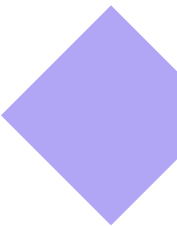
Back-to-School Mental Health Toolkit for Families

Building a Strong Foundation for Student Success
& Family Wellness

Contents



Welcome	3
Starting Strong: A Back-to-School Wellness Guide	4
Top 5 Back-to-School Stressors—and How to Help	11
Getting Ready for Back to School	13
Healthy Habits for a Stronger School Year	15
When to Worry, When to Reach Out	20
Mental Health Matters: How to Recognize When a Child May Need Support	22
Mental Health At a Glance	27
Family Wellness & Self-Care Essentials	29
Activity Worksheets	34
New Year, Fresh Start: The Backpack Activity	
"What's in My Coping Toolbox?"	
3-2-1: My Back-to-School Reflection	
"What If...?" Scenarios	
My Daily Recharge Plan	
Connection Cards	





Welcome Back! Starting the Year Strong

As a new school year begins, we know families are facing a lot of stress and uncertainty. These challenges can affect how your child feels, learns, and shows up at school. At the same time, teachers and school staff are working hard to make schools safe and welcoming places for all kids.

This **Back-to-School Mental Health Toolkit** is here to help you support your child's well-being. Inside, you'll find quick-reference guides, conversation starters, activity worksheets, and tools designed to help your family throughout the school year. These resources can help you:

- Create supportive, welcoming spaces at home
- Recognize signs when your child may be struggling
- Know when and how to ask for extra help
- Build stronger connections with your child and their teachers
- Take care of your own well-being

Together, we can make sure mental health is a part of every child's experience—and help every family feel supported along the way.

—**The Cartwheel Team**



Juliana Chen, M.D.
Chief Medical Officer



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Starting Strong: A Back-to-School Wellness Guide

Whether your child is starting a new grade or returning to familiar routines, the beginning of the school year can bring both excitement and stress. This guide offers practical ways to help prepare for the school year, recognize when your child may need extra support, and know how to reach out with confidence.



Daily Routines & Transitions

Sleep schedule is consistent (8–10 hrs each night)

Support by: creating a calming bedtime routine, limiting screens before bed, and keeping a consistent sleep/wake time, even on weekends

Look out for: fatigue, trouble waking up, or falling asleep late

Consider support if: sleep issues persist, mood shifts during the day, or your child expresses increased anxiety at night

Morning routine is predictable and low-stress

Support by: preparing clothes/lunch/backpacks the night before—and having your child help or take charge, offering choices when helpful, keeping tone calm and positive

Look out for: meltdowns, anxiety before school, school refusal

Consider support if: morning distress becomes frequent, or your child consistently avoids school or expresses upset about going

After-school wind-down time is built in

Support by: creating quiet, unstructured time after school especially before starting homework; offering a snack, walk, or low-stimulation activity

Look out for: irritability, shutdowns, or excessive worry about peers, schoolwork, or self

Consider support if: your child frequently seems overwhelmed, shows ongoing mood swings, or avoids engaging in more persistent ways



Support looks different at every age. Focus on modeling routines, setting age-appropriate expectations, and helping your child build independence.



Emotional Check-Ins

You're regularly checking in on how your child is feeling

Ask: "What was the best/worst part of today?" or "How did things go at school today?"

Look out for: changes in mood or energy, negative self-talk, big reactions, or "I don't want to go to school" or saying no without a clear reason

Consider support if: worries, sadness, or frustration persist for more than 2 weeks

You're helping your child name and express basic emotions (happy, worried, frustrated)

Support by: modeling your own feelings out loud (e.g., "I felt frustrated when..."), using visuals or emotion charts for younger kids

Look out for: shutting down, tearfulness, frequent anger outbursts, or withdrawal

Consider support if: emotions are extra big, unpredictable, or interfere with daily life

You're offering space to talk—even if your child doesn't take it right away

Support by: creating low-pressure moments (e.g., in the car, on a walk, before bedtime), being present and leaning into listening (e.g., put your phone away)

Look out for: persistent avoidance, big feelings, increased anxiety, irritability, or shutting down

Consider support if: your child avoids all conversation or seems upset without sharing why



Some kids are naturally quieter or take more time to open up. As they grow, it's also normal for them to pull away at times. What matters most is letting your child know you're always available, interested, and ready to listen—without pushing too hard.



Social Well-Being

Your child has at least one friend or safe adult at school

Support by: asking your child who they like spending time with at school, encouraging playdates or social activities, helping them identify a trusted adult they can go to

Consider support if: your child expresses loneliness or shares they're being excluded or bullied, or they seem disconnected from their peers

You've discussed how to ask for help or advocate for themselves

Support by: role-playing how to ask a teacher or counselor for help, discussing examples of when it's important to speak up

Look out for: your child being easily overwhelmed, confused by schoolwork or peer interactions, reluctance to speak up, or shutting down instead of asking questions

Consider support if: they're struggling but not asking for help

Your child is developing age-appropriate social skills

Support by: modeling respectful communication at home, encouraging teamwork and sharing, helping your child practice perspective-taking

Look out for: frequent conflict at home or with peers, difficulty understanding social cues, or challenges working in groups

Consider support if: social difficulties are interfering with learning or peer relationships, persistent difficulties at home, or your child struggles to fit in



Some kids need more support to build friendships and learn how to advocate for themselves, especially in new settings or during periods of transition. You can help by modeling positive social skills, encouraging practice in safe settings, and reminding your child that making friends takes time.



School Engagement & Motivation

Your child is showing interest or curiosity about learning

Support by: asking what they're learning, encouraging questions, celebrating effort over outcomes, and modeling your own curiosity

Look out for: "School is boring," avoidance of conversations about school, refusing to do homework, or showing signs of perfectionism or excessive worry about school performance

Consider support if: low motivation persists, your child frequently expresses negativity about school or themselves, seems overly focused on achievement, or school-related stress impacts learning or mood

You've talked about what to do if school feels "too hard"

Support by: normalizing mistakes and struggles, encouraging problem-solving, and offering help breaking down tasks

Look out for: panic over homework, fear of making mistakes, perfectionism, or refusal to try

Consider support if: your child frequently cries, shuts down, or expresses distress over schoolwork or performance

Your child is building confidence in their ability to succeed

Support by: praising effort, helping set small goals, encouraging persistence when things get tough (or for some kids stepping back)

Look out for: giving up easily, working excessively hard, comparing themselves negatively to others, saying things like, "I'm not good at anything" or "I have to get an A"

Consider support if: your child shows ongoing self-doubt, avoids challenges, is very hard on themselves, or seems to be losing confidence



Every child's learning journey looks different. Motivation can ebb and flow, especially during transitions—what matters most is offering steady encouragement and celebrating effort and progress, not perfection.



Family Support

You know your child's teacher and school counselor

Support by: reaching out early to build a positive relationship before challenges arise, attending school events or meetings when possible

Look out for: uncertainty about who to contact for questions or support

Consider support if: you need help navigating school resources or understanding how to best support your child's needs

You create a safe space to talk about feelings

Support by: modeling calm self-talk and self-care, sharing your own emotions appropriately, and showing healthy ways to manage stress

Look out for: your child avoiding emotional conversations, dismissing feelings, or expressing that "feelings are bad"

Consider support if: your child struggles to express emotions or seems overwhelmed by their feelings

You know where to turn if your child needs extra help

Support by: familiarizing yourself with school and community learning and mental health resources, emergency contacts, and support services

Look out for: uncertainty about available resources or hesitation to seek help when concerns arise

Consider support if: difficulties at school, ongoing stress, anxiety, sadness, or behavioral changes persist or worsen, or if you feel unsure about next steps



Every family's support needs are unique. Building strong connections with your child, their school, and community resources helps create a foundation for your child's learning, success, and overall well-being.

When to Reach Out

You know your child best. If something feels off—or if you just have a nagging worry—it's okay to ask for support. You don't have to wait until there's a crisis to check in.

Start by talking to someone who knows your child, like their teacher, school counselor, or pediatrician. They can help you figure out what's going on and whether more support could help.

You might consider connecting with a school counselor or mental health provider such as [Cartwheel](#) if your child is experiencing:

- Ongoing sadness, irritability, or withdrawal from activities
- Persistent changes in sleep, eating, or energy levels
- High levels of anxiety or worry about school or separation
- A drop in school performance or motivation
- Frequent self-critical talk or low self-esteem
- Expressions of hopelessness, self-harm, or concerning behaviors



Remember that asking for help is a strength—and getting support early can make all the difference.

Starting Strong: A Back-to-School Wellness Checklist

A quick guide to support your child's mental health and well-being this school year.



Daily Routines

- ☐ Consistent sleep schedule
- ☐ Low-stress morning routine
- ☐ Built-in after-school wind-down time



School Engagement

- ☐ Shows interest in learning
- ☐ Knows it's okay to make mistakes
- ☐ Building confidence and trying new things



Emotional Check-Ins

- ☐ Regularly ask how they're feeling
- ☐ Help name and talk about emotions
- ☐ Offer space to talk (no pressure)



Family Support

- ☐ You know who to contact at school
- ☐ Home feels safe to talk about feelings
- ☐ You know where to turn for extra help



Social Well-Being

- ☐ Has a friend or trusted adult at school
- ☐ Knows how to ask for help
- ☐ Developing social skills with support

Wondering if something's off? Talk to your child's teacher, counselor, or pediatrician, or connect with a mental health partner such as **Cartwheel**. Remember you don't have to figure it out alone.



Remember that asking for help is a strength—and getting support early can make all the difference.

Top 5 Back-to-School Stressors —and How to Help

The start of a new school year often brings a mix of excitement, change, and stress. While some worry is normal, ongoing challenges may be a sign your child needs extra support. Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping kids manage these transitions with calm and consistency. Here are five common back-to-school stressors, along with simple ways to help kids and teens cope.



Changing Sleep Routines

What to Look For

Trouble falling asleep, cranky mornings, or fatigue during the day

How to Help

- Begin shifting bedtimes and wake-ups 1–2 weeks before school starts.
- Keep sleep/wake times consistent, even on weekends.
- Start the bedtime routine at a set time each night (ideally 30–60 minutes before sleep).
- Establish calming activities (dim lights, quiet time, limited screens).
- Encourage the whole household to wind down together in the evening.



Social Worries

What to Look For

Nervousness about making friends, lunchtime, activities, or fitting in

How to Help

- Ask who they're hoping to see or spend time with.
- Practice conversation starters or ways to join in.
- Remind them that many kids feel nervous about friendships and change.
- For younger kids, consider arranging a first-week buddy; with tweens/teens, talk about identifying a friend they can turn to for support at school.
- Reassure them that friendships take time—and it's okay not to be friends with everyone.



Academic Pressure

What to Look For

Worry about falling behind, perfectionism, frustration with schoolwork, or school avoidance

How to Help

- Emphasize effort and progress, not just grades.
- Break assignments into smaller, manageable steps.
- Normalize mistakes and setbacks—remind kids this is how we grow and learn.
- Offer encouragement without adding pressure, especially early in the year
- Reassure them that it's okay to ask for help—from teachers, tutors, or you.



Separation Anxiety

What to Look For

Tears or clinginess, physical complaints (e.g., stomach aches), or asking to stay home

How to Help

- Keep drop-offs short, calm, and confident—even if your child is upset.
- Create a simple goodbye ritual (like a wave, hug, or special phrase).
- Send a small comfort item or note if allowed.
- If anxiety continues, partner with your child's teacher or counselor to create a plan.



Transition Overload

What to Look For

Mood swings, meltdowns, avoidance, or difficulty adjusting to new routines

How to Help

- Keep mornings and evenings as consistent and calm as possible.
- Build in breaks and downtime after school.
- Offer extra patience and empathy—transitions are hard for everyone.
- Validate feelings and give kids space to adjust.
- Reassure them it's okay to feel overwhelmed and to take things one step at a time.

Check in regularly about how your child is feeling. Let them know it's okay to have ups and downs—and that they can turn to you for support. Some stress is normal, but if it doesn't ease after a few weeks, reach out to a teacher, counselor, or pediatrician. Early support helps kids feel better faster.

Getting Ready for Back to School

A simple conversation guide to help families feel more prepared for the new school year.

Instructions for Families:

Use this worksheet to help kids and teens reflect on how they're feeling about the start of school and what might help them (and you!) feel more ready. Kids can fill it out on their own or with a caregiver or another trusted adult. Then, set aside time to talk through the answers. This is a chance to check in, and make a plan for a strong start together!



Looking ahead

1. What are you most looking forward to this year?

2. Is there anything you're feeling nervous or unsure about?



Daily Routines

1. What helps your mornings go smoothly?

2. What's one thing we can do to make mornings feel less stressful?

3. What helps you relax after school?



Feelings & Emotions

1. How do you usually feel on the first day of school?

2. What's one thing we can do to make mornings feel less stressful?

3. What helps you relax after school?



Friendship & Belonging

1. Who are you hoping to spend time with this year?

2. Is there someone at school you can go to if you need help or a break?

3. Is there anything you'd like help with when it comes to friends or social stuff?



Learning & Confidence

1. What's something you're excited to learn or try this year?

2. What's something that felt hard last year that you want to get better at?

3. What can I do to support you when school feels tough?



Let's Plan Together

1. What's one goal you want to set for the first month of school?

2. What's something you'd like to celebrate this fall (no matter how small)?

3. Anything else you want me to know or talk about?



Plan a time to talk through this together—maybe during a walk, at dinner, or one-on-one time before bed. Let your child take the lead, and focus on listening with curiosity.

Healthy Habits for a Stronger School Year

Building a practice of healthy habits at home helps children both mentally and physically. Simple, consistent routines provide structure and predictability, which promote mental wellness and make it easier to spot challenges early. Use this guide to encourage positive habits in your family for a successful school year.

As you build healthy routines for your family, remember they matter for you, too. Modeling balance and self-care not only supports your own well-being, but also shows your child that taking care of oneself is important at every age.

Why Healthy Habits Matter

- **Mental Wellness:** Predictable daily routines reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Physical Health:** Sleep and movement support focus, energy, and healthy growth.
- **Emotional Resilience:** Strong connections build confidence and coping skills.
- **Early Awareness:** Regular check-ins make it easier to address concerns early.

Healthy Habits Checklist



Physical Activity

- Aim for 60 minutes of active play or movement daily.
- Mix it up: walking, biking, dancing, sports, or playground time. All movement counts!
- Get outside if you can to boost mood and vitamin D.
- Even 10 minutes of movement before school can improve focus. This can be especially helpful for anxious kids or kids who like activity.



Younger kids often benefit from unstructured active play, while older kids might prefer organized sports or solo workouts. Find what fits your child's interests and your family's schedule.



Sleep

- Aim for 8–10 hours of sleep each night.
- Keep bedtimes and wake-up times consistent, even on weekends.
- Build a calming bedtime routine like reading or quiet time.
- Keep screens out of the bedroom for better sleep quality.



Sleep needs change as kids grow, but tweens and teens still need 8–10 hours. Supporting healthy sleep can mean sticking to routines, creating quiet wind-down time, and adjusting based on your child's needs.



Balanced Screen Time

- Talk together about how screens are used—for school, fun, or connection.
- Encourage screen-free activities like reading, crafts, cooking, or family games.
- Pay attention to how screens affect your child's mood, sleep, and daily routines.
- Model balance by unplugging during meals, bedtime, or family time.



Screen use looks different at every age. Older kids often use screens for schoolwork or connecting with friends. Focus on balance, healthy habits, and open conversations over strict limits.



After-School Routines

- Offer a healthy snack and hydration break right after school.
- Include a short transition or reset time before starting homework.
- Set up a quiet, consistent space for homework or study.
- Balance study time with movement and unstructured downtime.
- Keep after-school schedules predictable but not overloaded.



Older kids may manage their own downtime and snacks, and working parents can support routines by planning together or checking in later. What matters most is helping your child find a rhythm that supports rest, focus, and balance.



Positive Connections

- Encourage time with friends and peers.
- Support participation in group activities or hobbies (e.g., sports, music, clubs, faith groups, volunteering).
- Help your child identify trusted adults outside the home (e.g., a teacher, coach, counselor, or relative).
- Talk about kindness, inclusion, and how to be a good friend or teammate.



Social connection looks different for every child. Some need extra support or prefer one-on-one interactions—that's okay. What matters most is having at least one trusted peer or adult they feel connected to.



Family Check-Ins

- Make space for brief daily connection—even 5–10 minutes counts.
- Share “highs and lows” to encourage open conversation.
- Use natural moments to connect (car rides, mealtimes, texts, bedtime).
- Ask open-ended questions and listen without jumping in to fix.
- Try weekly family check-ins to reflect, plan, and problem-solve together. Even young children can participate in problem-solving.



Being present and consistent—even in small moments—builds trust and emotional safety. Celebrate progress and successes together to strengthen connection and build a safe space early.

Tips for Success



Be consistent, but stay flexible—routines evolve as children grow.



Make routines engaging by offering choices and celebrating small wins.



Listen, communicate openly, and validate your child’s feelings.



Model healthy habits. Kids learn a lot from what they see.



Reach out for support if concerns or challenges persist.



Remember: Healthy routines build a foundation for your child’s wellness and school success. Your support and presence make a real difference—and families don’t need to get it right all the time. Progress, not perfection, is what counts.

Worksheet

My Healthy Habits Plan for

_____ (fill in the month)

Instructions for Families:

Building healthy habits doesn't have to be overwhelming—small steps add up. Use this page to think about what helps you feel good and choose a few routines to focus on this month. Kids can fill it out on their own or with a parent, caregiver, or another trusted adult. Then, come together as a family to share your plans and talk about how everyone can support each other.

Name: _____



Physical Activity

My goal or plan for moving more this month:



Positive Connections

My goal or plan for connecting with family, friends, or others this month:



Sleep

My goal or plan for better sleep this month:



Family Check-Ins

My goal or plan for talking and checking in with family this month:



Screen Time

My goal or plan for healthy screen use this month:



My One Big Goal

This month, I want to focus most on:



After Your Day

My goal or plan for how I spend time after school, work, or daily activities:



My Bonus Goal

Something extra I want to try this month:

When to Worry, When to Reach Out

A Caregiver's Guide to Mental Health Signs

All kids and teens have tough moments, and it isn't always clear when to be concerned. This guide shares some common patterns families notice, along with suggestions for when to check in, seek help, or reach out for extra support.



When to Worry

If you notice **any of these lasting more than 1–2 weeks**, it may be time to connect with school or ask for help:

Younger Children

- Frequent stomachaches or headaches
- Frequent emotional outbursts or tantrums
- Clinginess, trouble separating from caregivers
- Significant difficulties with transitions
- Avoiding school or activities

Tweens & Teens

- Social withdrawal or withdrawal from activities
- Changes in sleep, appetite, or energy
- Increased or persistent irritability
- A decline in grades or increased challenges with school
- Expressions of hopelessness, anger, or panic
- Talking about or engaging in self-harm or other risky behavior



Every child is different, and you know your child best. If something feels “off” or doesn’t sit right with you, check in with your child and consider seeking support. Remember it’s okay to trust your instincts.



How to Start a Conversation

- “I’ve noticed you’ve seemed a little off. Want to talk?”
- “Is there anything you’ve been feeling worried or upset about lately?”
- “It’s okay to have big feelings—I’m here if you want to share.”
- “You don’t have to go through this alone. We can figure it out together.”



Who to Talk To

- Your child’s **teacher or school counselor**
- Your **pediatrician or primary care provider**
- **Mental health services** in your school or community
- If your district partners with **Cartwheel**, ask your school how to connect with us



Remember

- You don’t have to wait for a crisis.
- Early support can prevent bigger challenges later.
- Trust your gut—if you’re worried, it’s okay to ask for help.
- Never worry alone—and be sure to take care of yourself too.



Some kids find it hard to talk right away—spending time together through shared activities can help build trust and open the door to conversation over time.

Mental Health Matters: How to Recognize When a Child May Need Support

Parents, caregivers, and school staff are often among the first to notice when something seems off—whether it's a subtle shift in a child's mood, changes in classroom engagement, or signs of a deeper struggle. Use this guide to recognize early signs of mental health challenges, understand when to take action, and explore ways families and schools can work together to support students' well-being. Your daily connection to kids gives you a unique window into their well-being.

Recognizing early signs of mental health challenges—and knowing when and how to respond—can make a meaningful difference. Some children may show signs of stress or anxiety that, if addressed early, can prevent more serious challenges down the line. Others may be navigating ongoing difficulties that impact their ability to learn, connect, or cope. That's why it's important to notice not just the big changes, but also the quieter shifts in behavior, mood, or participation.

When families and schools work together to identify and respond early, it can improve attendance, academic performance, behavior, and—most importantly—a child's sense of safety and support.



Common Signs of Mental Health Challenges

Kids can express their struggles in many ways and it's important to understand that signs vary by age, developmental stage, and other individual differences.



Elementary School Students

Physical complaints like headaches or stomachaches with no clear medical cause.

Increased clinginess, separation anxiety, or fear of being apart from caregivers.

Tantrums, acting out, or difficulty regulating emotions.

Trouble focusing or following instructions, routines, or completing tasks.

Increased rigidity, difficulty with transitions, or low frustration tolerance.

Excessive worry or signs of fearfulness.

Withdrawal from friends, play, or favorite activities.



Middle & High School Students

Changes in sleep patterns, energy levels, or appetite.

Drop in grades, loss of interest in school or friends, or increased absences.

Anger, irritability, or sudden emotional outbursts.

Expressions of sadness, hopelessness, or low mood.

Excessive screen time, especially as a way to avoid social interaction or responsibilities.

Engagement in substance use, risky behaviors, or talk of self-harm.



When to Refer for Support

Some signs may not be urgent, but still point to a child who could benefit from additional support. These include:

- Frequent emotional outbursts or difficulty managing emotions.
- Decline in academic performance or classroom participation.
- Social withdrawal or increased isolation from peers.
- Repeated complaints of physical symptoms without medical explanation.
- Fear of making mistakes, perfectionism, or being overly self-critical.
- Significant passivity, reluctance to try new things, or avoidance of challenges.
- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence in abilities.
- Major life or family changes (e.g., divorce, new sibling, serious illness, or loss).

((!)) Behaviors That Require Immediate Attention

Certain signs call for urgent action to ensure a child's safety and well-being. These include:

- Talk or behavior indicating thoughts of self-harm, suicide, or harm to others.
- Severe withdrawal, panic attacks, or inability to function in school.
- Signs or reports of abuse or unsafe living environments.
- Extreme mood swings or disruptive, dangerous behavior.

School staff should follow your district's safety protocols; caregivers should contact a school counselor, pediatrician, or mental health provider for guidance and utilize emergency resources for immediate support.



Not All Children Show They Are Struggling in the Same Way

It's easy to notice children who are acting out, but others may be struggling quietly. Some signs to watch for include children who:

- Seem overly anxious about making mistakes
- Avoid speaking up or trying new things
- Are very hard on themselves or express low self-worth
- Appear compliant but seem withdrawn or “shut down”
- Struggle to form peer connections

These children may not openly ask for help or show their struggle—but they still need support.

Pay attention to quiet patterns, not just loud behaviors.



Academic & Attendance Patterns as Clues

Beyond behaviors, patterns in school engagement can offer important insights. The following may signal a student is struggling to engage or cope at school:

- **Frequent absenteeism, late arrivals, or early departures** may reflect school-related anxiety or other underlying struggles.
- **Drops in class participation, engagement, or work quality** may signal stress, mood challenges, or difficulties with concentration or motivation.
- **Increased discipline referrals** may indicate frustration, impulsivity, or behavioral concerns.
- **Perfectionism or fear of failure** may show up as incomplete work, overworking, or frequent reassurance-seeking.
- **Limited peer relationships or reluctance to join group activities** may reflect social anxiety or low self-confidence.
- **Frequent visits to the school nurse, counselor, or support staff** may signal deeper emotional challenges or a need for connection.
- **Communication from families about stressors or changes at home** may point to increased risk of a child struggling to learn or cope at school.

These patterns may not always be disruptive—but they're still meaningful. **Noticing early patterns can open the door for a check-in or referral for additional support.**



How to Take Action: Practical Steps for Educators & Caregivers

While educators observe patterns at school, families may notice others at home. When schools and caregivers share what they're seeing, it becomes easier to recognize when a child may need support. Below are some practical steps to take when you notice a child may be struggling.



For Schools & Educators

Document Observations: Keep brief, objective notes on behavior, mood, or academic changes to share with support teams.

Consult Support Teams: Reach out to counselors, social workers, or mental health leads for guidance.

Engage the Student: Check in with kindness, offering a calm, nonjudgmental space to talk.

Collaborate: Work with families to support the child, respecting diverse backgrounds and schedules.

Refer for Support: With caregiver consent, follow school procedures to connect students with counseling or mental health services.

Act Early: Don't wait for a crisis—early intervention makes a difference.



For Families & Caregivers

Observe & Note: Keep track of changes in behavior, mood, or daily routines to share with school or healthcare providers.

Connect with School: Communicate concerns with teachers, counselors, or school staff for support options.

Talk with Your Child: Gently ask how they're feeling and listen without judgment.

Collaborate: Partner with school staff, sharing information and working together to support your child.

Seek Help: With your child's agreement, access counseling or community resources. Services like Cartwheel can help.

Act Early: Reach out at the first signs of struggle to get timely support.

For Cartwheel partner schools:

Parents can **raise their hand directly** for support for their child or a school staff member can **refer** them for care. Early access to the right support can make all the difference.



Have Conversations About Mental Health

Talking about mental health can feel intimidating or awkward, but even a brief check-in using calm, caring language can make a real difference. Simply showing that you've noticed—and that you care—can help a child feel seen and be supported.

For elementary students:

- “You seem a little quiet today. How are you feeling?”
- “I noticed it looked like something was bothering you. Want to talk or take a break?”
- “It’s okay to have big feelings. Grown-ups are here to help.”

For middle & high school students:

- “I’ve noticed some changes lately. How’s everything going?”
- “You don’t have to go through hard things alone. Want to talk about anything?”
- “I’m here if you ever want to check in or need someone to listen. I might not have the answers, but I am here to help get them.”

You don’t need to have all the answers—being present and listening without judgment can go a long way.



Remember, You’re Not Alone

Recognizing when a child may need support is just the first step. Whether you're a caregiver or an educator, you're part of a team that can make a lasting difference. When in doubt, don't hesitate to reach out—to your school's mental health professionals, your child's care team, or trusted community partners.

If your district partners with **Cartwheel**, we're here to support you—whether that means consulting with school staff or connecting a family to care.

Mental Health At a Glance

A Quick Guide for Parents & Caregivers

We hope you'll find this resource helpful for spotting student mental health needs—from early signs to more serious concerns. Keep this printable tool nearby as a reminder of what to look for and how to respond in the moment.

As caregivers, you're often the first to notice when something feels different about your child. Trust those instincts—all of the signs in this guide are worth monitoring over time, and you don't have to figure this out alone. When you notice patterns or concerns, connect with your child and school to learn more, and reach out to your child's student support team about options for additional support.



Common Signs by Age Group

Elementary School Students

- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches) without medical cause
- Clinginess, separation anxiety, or fear of being apart from caregivers
- Tantrums, difficulty managing emotions, or low frustration tolerance
- Trouble following routines, instructions, or staying focused
- Excessive worry or withdrawing from play or friends

Middle & High School Students

- Changes in sleep, appetite, energy, or motivation
- Drop in grades or loss of interest in school and friends
- Irritability, anger, sadness, or flat mood
- Anxiety, panic, persistent worry, or feelings of depression
- Excessive screen time or avoidance of social interaction
- Substance use, risky behaviors, or talk of self-harm



Academic and Attendance Patterns That May Signal Distress

- Chronic absenteeism, tardiness, or early dismissals
- Sudden disengagement from learning
- Increased discipline referrals
- Family reports of stress, instability, or changes at home
- Frequent visits to the nurse or other support staff



Not All Distress is Loud

Some children may not ask for help, but still need support. Pay attention to quiet behaviors, including children who:

- Avoid participation, speaking up, or are anxious about making mistakes
- Are self-critical, perfectionistic, or have low self-esteem
- Seem compliant but emotionally shut down or disconnected
- Struggle to connect or engage with peers
- Are experiencing stress, instability, or changes at home

Pay attention to quiet patterns, not just loud behaviors.

When to act immediately

Connect with your child's school counselor or pediatrician to help assess if you observe:

- Talk or behavior suggesting self-harm or harm to others
- Severe withdrawal or panic attacks
- Signs of abuse or unsafe living situations
- Extreme, escalating behavior that poses risk

For acute concerns, connect with urgent care, call 911, or visit your local emergency room.



What You Can Say: Simple Conversation Starters

- "I've noticed you seem different lately. Want to talk or take a break?"
- "I'm here if you want to check in or need someone to listen."
- "You don't have to go through hard things alone."
- "I might not have all the answers, but I'm here to help find them."

You don't need all the answers—**just being present and listening without judgment goes a long way.**

You're Not Alone

You're part of a team that cares. If you're unsure, consult your school's student support team. If your district partners with **Cartwheel**, we're here to support you and your child.

Family Wellness & Self-Care Essentials

Building Resilience at Home

Every school year brings new challenges and new opportunities for families. This guide is designed to support parents and caregivers with practical, evidence-based strategies to help recognize stress, build resilience, and create healthy routines that strengthen both you and your child.

You don't have to implement everything at once. Start with what feels most relevant for you and build from there. Remember: taking care of yourself isn't selfish—it's essential for sustaining the important work you do every day.

Building Personal Resilience

Recognizing Your Stress Signs



Physical Signs

- Headaches or sleep problems
- Changes in appetite
- Increased irritability or fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating



Emotional Signs

- Feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- Social withdrawal from colleagues
- Decreased interest in activities
- Feeling sad or disconnected



Behavioral Signs

- Procrastination on important tasks
- Avoiding work tasks or responsibilities
- Increased use of substances
- Difficulty completing routine tasks

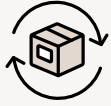
Managing Your Stress “Water Level”



Think of stress like water levels in the ocean. When stress levels are lower, you can navigate challenges effectively. During difficult times, even small waves can feel overwhelming.

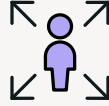
Key Strategy: Keep your stress at a level where you can breathe comfortably, think clearly, and help others without losing your own well-being.

Quick Mindfulness Techniques



Box Breathing (2 minutes)

Breathe in for 4 counts
Hold for 4 counts
Exhale for 4 counts
Hold for 4 counts
Repeat 4-6 times



Body Scan (5 minutes)

Start at your toes,
notice tension
Work upward through
each body part
Breathe into areas of tension
Release and relax
each section



Mindful Walking

Take a break from your desk
Walk slowly and deliberately
Notice each step and
your surroundings
Focus on physical sensations

Essential Self-Care Priorities



Sleep

Aim for 7-9 hours of restful sleep
Create a calming bedtime routine
Limit screens before bed



Nutrition

Stay hydrated throughout the day
Pack healthy snacks for sustained
energy
Avoid excessive caffeine



Physical Activity

Incorporate movement into your day
Take walking meetings when
possible
Use stairs instead of elevators



Social Connections

Prioritize relationships with family
and friends
Connect with colleagues or those in
your community for support
Remember: relationships matter most

"Building resilience is an ongoing process, not a one-time fix. Remember: even small degrees of change can make a difference."



Juliana Chen, M.D.

Chief Medical Officer, Cartwheel

Family Wellness & Support Strategies

Creating a healthy home starts with small, intentional actions. These strategies can help you set boundaries, support yourself and your family, and access help when needed.

Creating Boundaries at Home



Time Management

Set aside device-free time for yourself and your family

Create routines that include breaks

Protect time for meals together



Emotional Boundaries

Say "no" to additional commitments

Share responsibilities with your partner or support network

Ask for help before feeling overwhelmed



Physical Boundaries

Create a calm space at home for yourself

Step outside for fresh air daily as you can

Limit work tasks from spilling over at home

Building Family Support



For Loved Ones Who Are Struggling

Listen without judgment

Offer practical support (run an errand, share a chore, cook together)

Connect them with supportive resources

Check in regularly but respect their space



Creating Connection

Share appreciation for small wins

Celebrate family milestones

Make time for fun

Encourage open communication

Know Your Resources

Take a moment to learn what support is available to you—knowing your options makes it easier to reach out when you need it.

- **Trusted friends or family members**
- **Parent groups or community organizations**
- **Your child's pediatrician or your primary care provider**
- **Mental health supports** like **Cartwheel** available through your school district or community

Daily Wellness for You

Self-Assessment Questions



Weekly Check-In:

- What are my current stress triggers?
- How is stress affecting my physical and emotional well-being?
- What coping strategies have I tried this week?
- What small change could I make to better manage stress?
- Who in my network can I reach out to for support?

Remember: Self-care isn't selfish—it's essential. Small, consistent steps create lasting change and help you show up as your best self for your child and family.

Quick Reference

Daily Wellness Habits



Morning

- Set one realistic intention for the day
- Take three deep breaths before starting your day
- Drink a glass of water



During the Day

- Take micro-breaks between tasks
- Practice gratitude for one positive moment
- Connect meaningfully with a family member or friend



Evening

- Reflect on one thing that went well
- Disconnect from technology
- Engage in one activity that brings you joy

When to Seek Additional Support

It's time to reach out if you're experiencing:

Persistent feelings of overwhelm • Sleep problems lasting more than a week • Difficulty enjoying activities you usually love • Physical symptoms affecting your daily life • Unhealthy coping behaviors • Feeling disconnected from your purpose

Resources to Consider:

Trusted family or friends • Your employer's HR department • Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) • Your primary care physician • Mental health supports (like **Cartwheel**) available through your district and/or in your community



Self-Care Essentials: Daily Checklist

Use this checklist as a simple reminder to support your well-being at work and home. Print it, post it, keep it nearby, or adapt it to fit what works best for you.

Check In with Yourself

- ☐ I paused to notice how I'm feeling (physically & emotionally).
- ☐ I identified one source of stress or tension.
- ☐ I used one healthy strategy to manage that stress.

Prioritize Core Self-Care

- ☐ Slept at least 7-8 hours last night.
- ☐ Ate something nourishing and stayed hydrated.
- ☐ Moved my body—even briefly (stretching, walking, taking stairs).

Take Short Mindful Breaks

- ☐ Took 3 deep breaths before starting a task.
- ☐ Stepped away from my computer or desk.
- ☐ Noticed one positive moment or something I'm grateful for.

Set Boundaries That Protect My Energy

- ☐ Said “no” or delegated something when I needed to.
- ☐ Took a real lunch or break.
- ☐ Avoided checking email after hours (or set a limit).

Stay Connected

- ☐ Reached out to a friend or colleague for a check-in or kind word.
- ☐ Asked for help or support when I needed it.
- ☐ Expressed appreciation or encouragement to someone.

Remember every little bit counts and consistent practice, in ways big and small, can help protect against stress and burnout and build resilience.

Ask yourself, how many of the essentials are you able to prioritize each day, each week? What small changes could you incorporate to better fill your cup?

Activity Worksheets

The following activities are designed to help students begin the year with intention, strengthen coping skills, and build confidence for navigating challenges. Each worksheet can be used on its own or paired with classroom lessons, counseling sessions, or family conversations—sparking reflection, connection, and resilience as the school year unfolds.

 New Year, Fresh Start: The Backpack Activity

 "What's In My Coping Toolbox?"

 3-2-1: My Back-to-School Reflection

 "What If...?" Scenarios

 My Daily Recharge Plan

 Connection Cards

Activity

New Year, Fresh Start: The Backpack Activity

Starting a new school year is the perfect time to reflect on what we want to carry forward and what we're ready to leave behind. This simple activity helps students think about their hopes and goals while letting go of things that no longer serve them.

How to use this activity

Write or draw in and around each backpack—what you want to leave behind from last year, and what you want to take with you or start fresh this year. Examples might include leaving behind a worry or trying something new this school year. If you're a grown-up supporting students, consider completing your own backpack activity and then sharing your answers.



Things I am leaving behind



Things I am taking with me

Activity

"What's In My Coping Toolbox?"

How to use this activity

Circle the coping strategies that help you feel better when you're feeling stressed, anxious, angry, or overwhelmed. Add your own ideas on the blank lines, and remember—you always have these tools in your coping toolbox, ready to use anytime you need them.

Coping Tool Menu



Deep breaths



Listening to music



Drawing or coloring



Reading a book



Doing a puzzle



Petting an animal



Writing in a journal



Getting a drink of water



Taking a walk



Holding a fidget toy or stuffed animal



Talking to a friend



Finding a quiet space



Stretching or moving around



Thinking of something funny



Talking to a trusted adult



Positive self-talk



Reframing thoughts
("It's hard now, but I'll get through it")



Making a to-do list to organize your thoughts



5-4-3-2-1 grounding
(5 things you can see...)



Naming 3 things you're grateful for



Add your own:

Activity

3-2-1: My Back-to-School Reflection

How to use this activity

As you start the new school year, take a few minutes to reflect on what you're looking forward to, what you want to work on, and who can support you along the way. There are no right or wrong answers—just what's true for you!

If you're a grown-up supporting students, take a moment to complete your own back-to-school reflection. Consider sharing and comparing your answers as a way to build connection.

3

3 Hopes I Have for This School Year Are...

These could be about friendships, learning something new, having fun, trying something brave, or anything else important to you.

2

2 Goals I Want to Work Toward Are...

These could be related to school, activities, friends, or family.

1

When I need support, one person (or place) I can turn to is...

Think of someone you trust—like a friend, teacher, counselor, coach, or family member. It could also be a calming space or resource at school or outside of school. Share a bit about what you chose and why.

"What If...?" Scenarios

How to use this activity

As a new school year begins, it's normal for unexpected things to happen. Learning to think ahead can help you feel more ready and confident, not just at the start of school, but all year long.

Write down what you might do, say, or try for each scenario below, or come up with your own "What if...?" scenarios. There's no right or wrong answer—just what you think might help!

Scenarios

1. What if I forget my homework?



I could... _____

2. What if I don't have anyone to sit with at lunch?



I could... _____

3. What if I don't know the answer or make a mistake in front of the class?



I could... _____

4. What if I'm nervous about taking a test?



I could... _____

5. What if I feel left out?



I could... _____

Create your own

Try coming up with your scenarios. Think about both negative and positive things that could happen!

1. What if _____?



I could... _____

2. What if _____?



I could... _____

3. What if _____?



I could... _____

4. What if _____?



I could... _____

5. What if _____?



I could... _____



Why this helps:

When you practice how to handle moments ahead of time, your brain feels more prepared and your body feels calmer. It's a great way to build confidence and remind yourself that you have choices—even when things don't go as planned, and that good things can happen!

My Daily Recharge Plan

How to use this activity

Taking care of yourself every day helps your brain, body, and feelings stay in balance. Let's make a plan for how you can recharge throughout the day!



In the morning, I can energize myself by...

Choose one or more things that help you feel awake, focused, and ready for the day.

Examples: Eating breakfast, doing some stretches, listening to music, packing my backpack the night before.



At school, I'll take care of myself by...

Think about what helps you stay calm, focused, and confident at school.

Examples: Taking deep breaths, using a fidget tool, asking for help, using kind self-talk, talking to a friend.



After school, I can relax or recharge by...

What helps you unwind or reset after a busy day?

Examples: Going outside, reading, playing with a pet, journaling, having a snack, talking with someone I trust.



Before bed, I can wind down by...

What helps your brain and body get ready for sleep?

Examples: Turning off screens, taking a warm shower, reading a book, thinking of something good from the day.



Why this helps:

Making time to recharge helps you feel more focused, less stressed, and more ready to take on each new day. Your plan can change as you learn what feels best. You may need different things at different times of the year—try things out and see what works best for you! If you're a grown-up supporting students, create your own daily recharge plan because you matter too!

Activity

Connection Cards

A simple way to check in, share something important, or brighten someone's day.

How to use this activity

Use these little note cards to leave a kind, funny, or encouraging message for your kid or teen. Slip them into a lunchbox, backpack, or pillow—or share them with your child so they can leave messages for you! Small notes can spark connection and make everyday moments feel special.

 To: From:	 To: From:
 To: From:	 To: From:
 To: From:	 To: From:



Tip: These notecards can be a great way to ease back-to-school transitions and stay connected all year long—whether it's the first week of school, a tough day, or a moment worth celebrating.

At Cartwheel, we're committed to supporting the mental health and wellness of students and families. Together, we can create school environments where everyone can be their best self.

Learn more about how Cartwheel is the trusted partner to schools, students, and families through 1:1 evidence-based therapy for students, parent guidance, family therapy, staff therapy, psychiatry, and more.

www.cartwheel.org/families

