

Dear Parents/Guardians,

The health and safety of students and families is a top priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize that this can be a difficult time for parents, caregivers, students and families. The purpose of this communication is to provide information about resources to help students and families know where to reach out for access to mental health services, as well as to promote positive mental health and well-being during school closure.

We are all in this together.

COVID-19 is affecting people within Canada and globally. Given the rapidly evolving changes and the overall uncertainty related to the pandemic, it is normal for children, youth and adults to experience a wide range of thoughts and emotions. There is no right or wrong way to react to the changes to our everyday life in response to the pandemic. Some people may experience feelings of anxiety, panic and worry, while others may feel calm, and/or seem unaffected.

Some common reactions you may notice in children and youth during this time:

- Anxiety
- Worry
- Sadness
- Fear
- Anger or short tempered
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Unexplained headaches/ body pain
- Preoccupation with illness
- Confusion

These are just some common reactions; you may notice others. It is helpful to notice and observe reactions as opposed to judging. It is important to remember that acting or feeling different than usual is normal and expected during an abnormal event. You may also notice an increase in symptoms among children, youth and adults with mental health problems and disorders. It may be helpful to think of the reactions you notice as normal responses to abnormal events.

Parents and guardians benefit from increasing self care strategies to support their own well-being, and modelling healthy strategies for children and youth. All children and youth benefit from having the universal support of a caring, responsive adult that is available to listen, talk and offer support. For many children and youth, this universal support is all that is required.

For some students, professional support may be required. Parents/guardians are encouraged to seek professional mental health services if they notice that their child or youth is showing significant changes in their thoughts, feelings and behaviors that indicate the level of disruption that the child or youth is experiencing is intense, frequent, and interfering with their ability to cope with everyday life.

What to do if my child requires immediate mental health support?

If you are concerned about your child or youth's safety, seek immediate care by calling 911 or visiting your local emergency room immediately.

Who can I call for support and/or to learn about services in my area?

The following resources are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can speak confidentially with a professional for support and/or to learn about services in your area.

Navigation Resource:

- [1 Call, 1 Click](#) - confidential online support and connecting with a mental health services

Crisis Line Resources:

- [Crisis Line](#) - 1 866 996 0991
- [Kids Help Phone](#) 1-800-668-6868, Text CONNECT to 686868
- [Crisis Line for Children, Youth, Families](#): 1-877-377-7775
- [PLEO | Parents' Lifeline | Soutien aux parents](#) for parental support 1-855-775-7005

The Renfrew County District School Board has adapted the way supports and services can be provided through the School Support Counsellor and School Board Social Workers to support students, parents and guardians during school closure. For resources to promote mental health and well-being please visit the RCDSB Parent & Student website: [Information and Resources About Mental Health and Well Being](#). If you have any questions or concerns, you are welcome to contact the Principal, Vice Principal or School Support Counsellor by email. Click [here](#) for an information sheet that lists each school, staff names, and email contact information. If you are unsure who to contact in the school board, email studentmentalhealthsupports@rcdsb.on.ca and one of our Social Workers will help you connect. Note: email is not used to provide direct counselling support to students, parents/guardians but rather for connecting and sharing information. If you require immediate care or direct counselling support, please utilize the resource contacts listed above.

Tips to promote positive mental health and well-being

Parents and students can take simple steps to promote mental health and well-being with their child or youth at home. Focusing on things you can control is a helpful way to manage stress and foster resilience. Below are some helpful suggestions for promoting positive mental health and well-being:

Participate in a Free Online Webinar Series

A free webinar series is being offered by the Centre for Relationship Based Education in partnership with Nelson. The webinar series is offered online and is free. The webinar series is led by experts in the field and designed to provide parents/guardians with information about helping children and youth settle into staying at home, adapt learning, and promote the well-being of parents/caregivers.

- To learn more or to register for the webinar series, click [here](#):

- Learn about other available webinar and resources, click [here](#):

Practice self care and healthy coping. Be a positive role model, through displaying positive coping strategies, like utilizing calming deep breathing as well as focusing on how you are keeping safe as a family. Continue or begin self-care strategies, such as listening to music, watching movies, coloring/drawing/painting, playing with pets and trying to get enough sleep. Try to find ways to exercise. For example, walk the stairs several times, do push-up/plank/squat challenges with friends or family, stretch or try a virtual Yoga class. For more resources to promote mental health and well-being please visit the RCDSB Parent website: [Information and Resources About Mental Health and Well Being](#), including resources from the Psychology of Foundation of Canada's program, Kids Have Stress Too and Stress Lessons.

Provide daily structure and routines. Structure and routines create predictability, reduce stress and foster a sense of control, safety and security. Take time for connecting, learning, fun, exercise and regular mealtimes and bedtimes. Involve your child or teen in planning structure and routine. Parents can access the Learn at Home information that is available online: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/learn-at-home>

Become informed and prepared to talk to your child/family about COVID-19. We recognize that there is a wealth of information available online about the COVID-19 pandemic and it can become overwhelming. Parents are encouraged to:

1. Seek credible resources. Below is a list of credible resources designed to provide factual information about COVID-19.

[Renfrew County District and Health Unit information about COVID-19](#)

[Ontario Ministry of Health](#)

[Government of Canada - COVID-19](#)

[Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

[World Health Organization](#)

2. Review the information first to become informed.
3. Prepare to talk to your child by identifying age appropriate information to share.

Promote open communication. Children and youth worry less when they are provided with age appropriate, factual information. It can be helpful to discuss the coronavirus. Providing children and youth with space to have open and honest conversations about their thoughts, feelings and/or concerns can be very helpful. Below are some **tips on how to discuss the coronavirus with your child**:

- Have patience and understanding when speaking with your child.
- Make sure that you are in a calm state to talk to your child about the virus.
- Listen with care to your child's ideas, thoughts and concerns about the coronavirus. validate their thoughts and feelings.
- Reassure them on what the coronavirus is and why everyone is taking action to prevent the spread.

- Create opportunities to express and share thoughts and feelings.
- Share age appropriate information for your child or teens development. If you are unsure about what is age appropriate information to share, you can contact the resources provided, like the Kids Help Phone, to help guide you.
- Manage exposure to information. Take breaks, limit exposure to TV, social media. Too much or graphic news may create more anxiety.
- Encourage the important practice of frequent hand washing.

Below is a list of credible resources for information specific to mental health and COVID-19.

[School Mental Health Ontario](#), is dedicated to supporting student mental health across Ontario School Boards. SMHO has a section of their website devoted specifically for information relevant to parents, students and educators about supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Click [here](#) to access the website. Click [here](#) for 12 Easy and fun mental health practices to try at home.

Below are some additional resources for supporting mental health:

- CAMH - [Bounce Back](#) is a free skill-building program designed to help adults and youth 15+ manage low mood, mild to moderate depression, anxiety, stress or worry. Delivered online or over the phone with a coach, you will get access to tools that will support you on your path to mental wellness.
- Conscious Discipline - [Five Helpful Responses for Families](#)
- CAMH - [Talking to Kids InfoSheet](#)
- CHILD MIND - [Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus](#)
- National Association of School Psychologists - [Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#) 1-800-668-6868, Text CONNECT to 686868