

5-Minute Chats with Students

This tool is adapted from a similar resource created by the Anchorage School District SEL Team and revised with input from students in the Civics 2.0 afterschool program in Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Building personal connections and relationships is critical to being a culturally responsive educator and fostering engagement in learning. This template provides a structure and sample questions for one-on-one chats with students, opening the door to dialogue and offering an opportunity to learn more about their experiences at school.

How to use this template: Educators leading a single class should plan to connect with each student individually during the first weeks of school, and periodically throughout the year. Those leading multiple classes can collaborate with a team of teachers sharing students to divide responsibility and ensure that each student is contacted.

If possible, ask other members of staff in the building to assign each person an “advisory group” of students to contact. Those staff members could include administrators, deans, counselors, specialist teachers, office staff, paraprofessionals, security staff, or out-of-school time leaders. Consider allowing students to indicate which staff member they would prefer as their advisor. Be sure to notify families that their child has been assigned an advisor as part of an organized, school-wide effort.

Preparing to chat: The primary purpose of the chat is to find out about your student’s experience and perspective, so that you can get to know them as an individual, respond to their needs, learn from them for the benefit of the class and school, and build relational trust. Students have said that they feel more comfortable having discussions with staff who know them and have shared a little about their own lives. Trust is built over time, and it should not be assumed.

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Initiate – In a group setting, inform all students that you’ll be contacting them individually to connect and find out how things are going. Either have students sign up for a time for a call or in-person chat or reach out to them via a school- and parent- approved messaging app that allows for easy exchange of messages. If possible, let them choose! You could say something like:

“I’m reaching out to everyone in this group to find out how they feel about school, how they’re doing in class, what interests them, and how I can support them.”

Open – Show them that they are significant to you and that you care about them.

- “I’m glad to have the chance to chat with you one-on-one.”
- “I’m excited to have you in my class this year – I can tell you’re going to be a great addition to the group.”
- If you already know something about their lives, bring it up as appropriate. For example: “Your sister is in college now, right? How have you been adjusting?” or “Isn’t it baseball season already? How have you been managing to balance practice with everything else you have going on?”

Personalize – Ask a question that encourages the student to talk about their experience of school. Be more specific than asking, “How’s it going?” We are often socialized to answer this question with little thought or detail. Pay attention to body language that indicates whether the student wants to keep talking or move on.

- “How have you been doing in your classes lately?”
- “What is new for you since last school year?”
- “What are you learning that interests you the most?”
- “What would you say is your biggest source of joy at school right now? What about a source of stress?”

Invite Feedback – Show your students that you value their perspective and are open to making changes based on their input.

- “What would you like to see happen this school year?”
- “What are you and your classmates interested in that we could explore more in class?”
- “What do you need most from me and your other teachers right now to do well in your classes?”
- “What do you think our school/class is doing well so far this year?”
- “What do you think our school/class could be doing differently?”

Close – End on an optimistic, forward-thinking note.

- “Next week, we’re going to learn about _____. I’ll think about how to use some of the ideas you shared.”
- “Thanks for talking. Let’s check in again in a week or two to follow up about ____.”

Students may choose to answer these questions in more or less detail. If a student gives short answers and seems uncomfortable, thank them for their time and don't push them to say more. Continue to let them know that you are interested in their input and that you care about their success. If they choose to elaborate, you can use the following phrases:

Probe: "Tell me more about that." "What does that look like?" "I want to make sure I understand what you're saying. Can you explain a little more?"

Validate emotions: "That must be really difficult." "It sounds like that had a big impact on you."

Stay solution-oriented: "What do you think would make the situation better?" "What can we do to make things right?" "What might be a good first step?" "What do you think would happen if we tried ___?"

Wind down the conversation: "You've given me some things to think about. I'm going to take some time to think about what you've shared with me, and we can arrange to talk again in a few days."