



# LAUNCH PAD

**Engaging Elementary Schools  
in Violence Prevention**





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## Engaging Elementary Schools in Violence Prevention

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King County Sexual Assault Resource Center (KCSARC) has been serving survivors of sexual assault since 1976 and continuously works to build communities free from sexual violence through prevention and education efforts. We know that educators and school staff play an important role in the lives of their students, and can make an especially positive impact on young people who have experienced trauma. Our hope in creating this resource is to assist in the support of students who have been victimized by sexual violence, aid educators in creating trauma-informed classrooms, and increase violence prevention programming in schools.

At the elementary school level, it is possible that abuse has already occurred in a child's life. Many young children have had little exposure to the world outside of their own family and may not understand what behaviors constitute abuse. By effectively supporting victims and working to create trauma-informed classrooms, schools can have tremendous impact on a young person's healing process.

KCSARC is here to help. To learn more about KCSARC services please call the 24-hour resource line at 1.888.99.VOICE(86423) or visit [www.kcsarc.org](http://www.kcsarc.org). To receive more information about education efforts or with questions about how to engage students in prevention efforts please reach out by email to [education@kcsarc.org](mailto:education@kcsarc.org).

## School as a Safe Space



Trauma-informed classrooms are learning environments that work to address the educational needs of students who have experienced trauma. The research estimates that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys experience sexual assault before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> With such high rates of victimization, it is vital for schools to create academic spaces that foster healing.

Every person who experiences sexual assault or other trauma will respond uniquely. However, it is not uncommon for children who have experienced violence to have difficulty focusing, learning, or regulating emotions.<sup>2</sup> Educators may observe these difficulties in the classroom through behavioral issues, challenging emotions, changes in academic performance, and/or low school attendance. The most effective solutions to these challenges can be found when a student's experience outside of school is taken into consideration. Meaningful improvements to student conduct can be made when we work to understand the root causes of behavioral and/or academic concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015). Understanding Sexual Violence: Tips for Parents & Caregivers of Children. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.nsvrc.org>

<sup>2</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2010). Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.nctsn.org>

Effectively supporting survivors is a key element of prevention programming. As schools start these important conversations, students may turn to staff with their experiences of abuse or violence. Beginning prevention-focused discussions aids in building a culture where victims feel safer to seek support. This work sends the message to all community members that survivors will be believed and that violence is not tolerated.

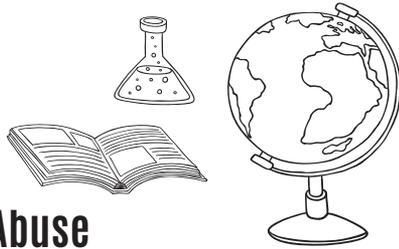
We know that all students who have experienced trauma may be more likely to act out within the school environment. However, research has consistently found that students of color are suspended and expelled from school at disproportionately high rates.<sup>3</sup> A review of available statistics also shows us that LGBTQ+ youth are at increased risk of experiencing bullying, harassment, and physical violence.<sup>4</sup> In order to effectively prevent any single form of violence, we must actively work against all forms of oppression. It is imperative that inequities within the educational system are addressed.

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<sup>3</sup>Tom Loveless, The 2017 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning? (The Brookings Institution, 2017) 23-33.

<sup>4</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017, June 21). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.cdc.gov>

## Understanding the Dynamics of Sexual Abuse



Disclosures of sexual abuse by young children are often indirect or disguised. It is common for kids to drop hints about the abuse or to talk about it accidentally. A child might say something like “the babysitter and I have a secret,” or “coach makes me feel weird.” Statements such as these may make the young person feel that they have told others, even if the disclosure was not understood or recognized by a supportive adult. It is also possible for children to make second hand disclosures if they learn a peer is experiencing abuse.

Most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the child already knew in some capacity.<sup>5</sup> Offenders often gain access to young people by utilizing a tactic called “grooming.” Grooming is an intentional process that often begins when an offender works to earn the trust of a community and seeks positions where they have access to children. Through this process perpetrators often create a reputation for themselves as helpful and reliable people. After establishing a trusting relationship with a child and their caregivers, it is common for offenders to begin crossing physical boundaries. They may start by using forms of touch that are known to the young person, such as hugs or kisses, and then escalate to sexual abuse. Within this dynamic, offenders will often threaten the child, bribe them with special gifts, and/or blame them for the abuse. This process creates barriers to the young person coming forward and often delays disclosures.

It is important to note that the false reporting rate for sexual assault is quite low, occurring only in between 2 and 8 percent of cases.<sup>6</sup> It is also true that a child may recant or take-back a disclosure if they do not receive a supportive response or if it creates a significant disruption in their family. It is not uncommon for children to want to make it all go away. Telling a child who has experienced violence that you believe them is a vital step in supporting their healing.

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<sup>5</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2010). What is Sexual Violence?. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.nsvrc.org>

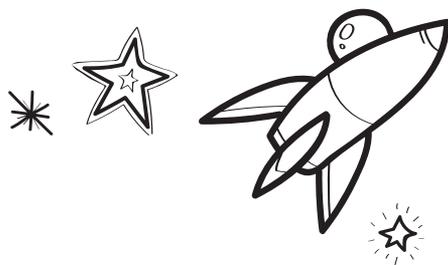
<sup>6</sup> Kimberly A. Lonsway, Joann Archambault, & David Lisak, False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault (The National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women, 2009) 1-2.

## How can I support a student who has experienced sexual abuse?

**Tell the young person you believe them.**

When a victim is believed they are much more likely to continue seeking the support they need to heal. If a student discloses sexual abuse thank them for telling you, state that you believe them, and let them know that you will do all that you can to support them.

Until a disclosure is made, all the messages a victim has received about the abuse have come from the abuser. These messages must be countered with positive affirmations and reminders that telling you was the right thing to do.



Avoid asking accusing questions such as “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” or making victim blaming statements such as “You should have told them to stop.” It is important to remember that there are many valid reasons that disclosures are delayed. Instead, saying something like “Thank you for telling me, this is not your fault and you are not in trouble,” can help the child understand that they are doing the right thing by coming forward.

Do not ask the child any leading questions in an attempt to gather more information. Inquiries such as “It was your cousin, wasn’t it?” or “Did it happen in the bathroom?” can interfere with a future CPS or law enforcement investigation.



## Know your duties as a mandated reporter.

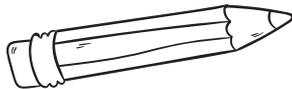
All teachers and school staff are required to report suspected abuse or neglect of a person under the age of 18.<sup>7</sup> KCSARC recommends that the person who initially heard the child's disclosure be the one to make the report to CPS or law enforcement.

Review your school and district policies. You will be much better equipped to support a student if you know where to turn should a report need to be made.

To effectively support student survivors through the mandated reporting process educators should:



- Inform the student about your role as a mandated reporter and explain what that means in a developmentally appropriate way. For young children this might sound something like: "Our job at school is to help keep you as safe as possible, it is important that we don't keep hurtful things a secret. You are not in trouble, but I do need to talk to other people about this."



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<sup>7</sup>RCW 26.44.030

- Communicate with the student about the report, let them know when you plan to make it and what the next steps will be.
- If your school policy requires you to inform a non-offending parent/guardian about the report, tell the student about this responsibility and provide information on how you plan to do so. When making the decision to discuss a disclosure with caregivers, be sure to consider the child's safety in the home and any possible likelihood that they may be coached by a caregiver on how to respond in an interview.
- Work with the young person to identify and address any safety concerns they may have. Ask the question: "How can I make school feel safer for you?" Consider the safety implications if the person who committed the assault is a family member, friend, or another student in the school.
- Understand that involvement with CPS/law enforcement may have been historically difficult and/or unsafe for many people, especially for LGBTQ+ families and communities of color. Create ample space to address questions, concerns, and identify necessary supports for the victim and their caregivers.
- Give students choices and invite them to be an active part of the process as much as possible.

## **Work in partnership with other supports in the student's life.**

Communicate effectively with other safe adults in the young person's life while also holding an understanding that confidentiality is important. In a developmentally appropriate way, let the student know who else you plan to inform and what you will tell them. Offer students the opportunity to be present when appropriate.

Empower the young person to identify the supports that help them to feel safest. Make referrals to resources both within the school and the wider community as needed.

Take a team approach when youth need to miss class time. Communicate clearly with caregivers and students about ways they can stay caught up on classwork as much as possible.



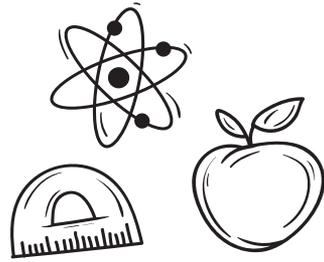


## **A Note on Self Care**

It can be difficult to hold the knowledge that a child has been harmed. Be sure that you are taking the necessary steps to receive the support you need as well.

KCSARC's 24-hour resource line is available to educators and other community members who are supporting survivors. Reach an advocate at any time by dialing 1.888.99.VOICE(86423).

# Trauma-Informed Classrooms for All



You may not always be aware of the trauma histories of each student in your classroom. However, all children benefit from increased classroom supports. There are many things you can do to help make learning environments accessible to everyone.

## **Set clear expectations and boundaries.**

Many children report feelings of fear or confusion after experiencing sexual abuse. You can help to rebuild a student's ability to trust others by setting clear expectations and remaining consistent.

Keep a predictable routine and communicate classroom transitions clearly. It can be helpful to have a daily agenda posted in the classroom and to review it with students. Give young people warnings and state next-steps before transitions occur.<sup>8</sup>

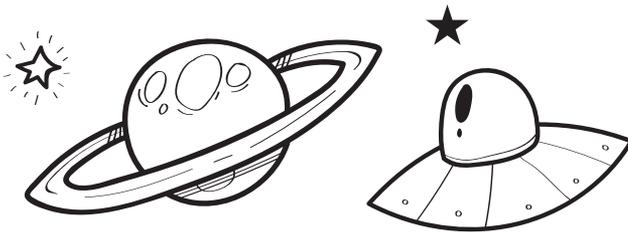
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<sup>8</sup>Isaiah B. Pickens, PH.D., & Nicole Tschopp, LCSW-C, Trauma-Informed Classrooms (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2017) 11-12.

## Empower students to care for themselves.

Give students the opportunity to make decisions when possible. Offering two equally acceptable choices can help increase students' sense of agency and reduce power struggles.

Teach students to recognize when they need breaks and encourage them to reach out for support. Work with students to create a plan for when they need to take a break. It is helpful to have safe spaces within the classroom or school that can be utilized for this purpose.



## **Strive to recognize potential triggers.**

Students who have experienced violence may be triggered by reminders of the abuse. Triggers are highly individualized reminders of the assault or perpetrator and are therefore impossible to predict. Anything from a sight, a sound, a smell, tone of voice, or facial feature can trigger a trauma response.

When a child is triggered, typical trauma responses include wanting to leave the situation (flight), becoming aggressive or behaviorally challenging (fight), or spacing out (freeze).

If a child becomes triggered, utilizing grounding strategies can be an effective way to bring them back into their bodies and the present moment. Grounding can be achieved by prompting the child with a familiar and pre-determined cue such as “let’s take a snack break” or “put your things away and get ready for story time.” It can also be helpful to assist the child in learning other grounding techniques such as breathing and/or counting exercises.

Classroom and school consequences for behavioral difficulties should be consistent and well understood by all. It is important for educators to examine their rationale and goals behind instituting a consequence and to avoid being reactive. Schools should also make efforts to ensure that consequences do not replicate abusive tactics or trigger the young person.

## **Work to build connection with students.**

Opportunities to build strong connections with safe and supportive adults are beneficial for all children. Find space within the classroom and curriculum to check-in with students and understand their feelings.

Many students who have experienced a trauma or ongoing abuse may develop an unfavorable view of themselves and/or difficulty forming healthy bonds with supportive adults.<sup>9</sup> Educators can work toward changing this internal narrative by creating opportunities for student success, recognizing positive traits, and reminding young people of their value. Validate students' experiences and feelings while delivering feedback or consequences in a neutral tone. Provide encouragement and positive reinforcement when students are engaging appropriately.

View difficult situations as the result of unhelpful behaviors, not bad students. Hold an understanding that mutual trust and respect are built in every interaction. Ask questions with the goal of determining the function of maladaptive behaviors and work with youth to get their needs met in healthier ways.

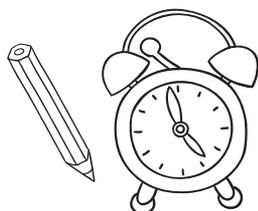
Leave the door open. Ensure students know that there are adults in the school that care for them and want them to be safe. Remind them that support is available whenever they need it.

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<sup>9</sup>Pickens, & Tschopp 5-6.

## Preventing Sexual Violence

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There are many steps that educators and schools can take toward the goal of ending sexual violence. Primary prevention efforts are focused on building communities free from violence by addressing the underlying causes of sexual assault. These efforts are grounded in the understanding that sexual violence will end when perpetration stops. Prevention work recognizes that individual students do not exist in isolation, but rather require the support of their peers, families, schools, and communities to learn about and have healthy relationships. Everyone plays a role in creating lasting change.

In practice, primary prevention efforts are about creating a culture shift. This work envisions communities where violence is not tolerated; respectful and empathetic behaviors are valued and students are educated on topics such as consent, boundaries and healthy relationships.

**Primary prevention is important to me because:**

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**I see primary prevention in my community looking like:**

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**What structures do we already have in place that support prevention goals?**

Many school communities already do a lot to encourage good citizenship within the student body. Often these techniques lay a vital foundation for primary prevention work. The research tells us that emotional health and connectedness, empathy, and academic achievement are all factors that may lessen the risk that a person will perpetrate sexual violence.<sup>10</sup> Many schools already utilize creative strategies to support student growth in these important areas and can expand on these efforts to include an intentional focus on violence prevention.

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<sup>10</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018, April 10). Sexual Violence: Risk and Protective Factors. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.cdc.gov>

**What is your school already doing to address these key factors?**

**Emotional Health and Connectedness:**

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**Academic Achievement:**

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**Empathy:**

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**As a community, we could increase our focus on these areas by:**

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## Widening the lens: a look at school values



Many schools have established core values with the goal of guiding students, staff, and families to be healthy members of the educational community. Educators may reference resources such as school taglines, slogans, or policies as a way of reinforcing expectations. One way to expand on a school's existing efforts to promote good citizenship is to look at the ways these values can also work to support the goals of violence prevention.

We often see schools that showcase their educational and community values in the style of an acrostic poem, acronym, or alliteration. For example, one school may utilize the acronym P.R.I.D.E in the following way:

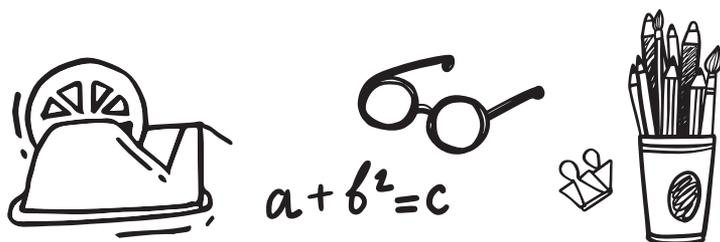
P: Positive Attitude

R: Respect All

I: Improve Everyday

D: Dedicated Learners

E: Encourage Others



Looking at these established values through a violence prevention lens, we can identify the way each supports the important factors of emotional health and connectedness, academic achievement, and/or empathy.

For instance, in the example on the left, an expanded focus of the “R: Respect All” value could include the idea that students exemplifying this expectation are likely respecting the boundaries of others and asking for consent before borrowing supplies. Another look at the “E: Encourage Others” value could include positive reinforcements for students who are empathizing with their peers’ experiences and choosing to offer encouragement rather than bully or tease.

**Your turn! Use the space below to examine your own school's values and how they can be expanded on.**

**Already Established Value Statements:**

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**Expanded Focus:**

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Having clear values and expectations written out is the first step, but communities must also actively bring these values to life. Having a plan in place to communicate values to students and families on a regular basis can help keep them at the forefront of community members' minds. Utilizing methods of positive reinforcement to celebrate young people who exemplify these values can help to remind students of their importance.

**We're already:**

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## **What are some additional strategies schools can use to actively integrate values?**

Consider implementing reward systems.

Schools have given out tickets to students who are exemplifying community values to positively reinforce this behavior. Tickets have then been used by students to access privileges such as choosing a song to play at lunch, using a special chair in the classroom, or having a teacher send a positive note home.

Create space for student-led discussions.

School values will have a much deeper impact if there is buy-in and leadership from students. Peer-to-peer learning can go a long way when establishing community norms. Educators can come up with many creative ways to get students involved in the conversation!

Actively incorporate values community-wide.

Core values and an intentional prevention focus can be incorporated into school functions, special events, and the physical environment. Continue the conversation regularly with the whole school community by actively addressing these topics at assemblies, in school newsletters, and during school-wide announcements. Posters can also be a good way to reinforce conversations that are actively happening in other spheres.

**My school could increase our focus on core values by:**

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**I could increase daily incorporation of core values  
in my classroom by:**

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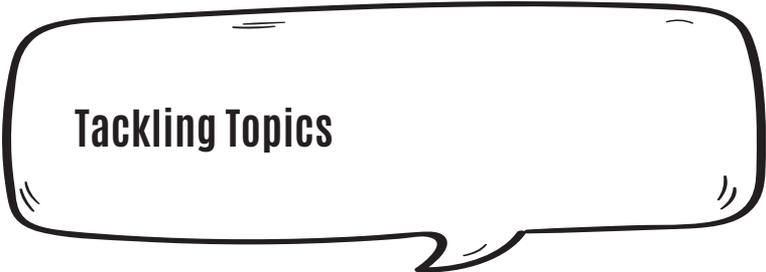
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## Tackling Topics

In addition to consistently reinforcing positive community values on a school-wide level, there are many conversations that educators can have with young people to help them explore the foundations of healthy relationships. At the elementary level, we encourage classrooms to thoughtfully incorporate lessons on the following topics:

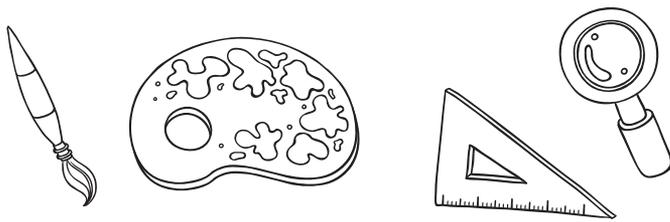
Building Empathy

Bullying + Harassment

Consent + Boundaries

Breaking Down Stereotypes

Healthy Friendships



Just like any other academic material, it is important for students to engage in prevention-focused conversations frequently. Over the course of many discussions, the knowledge students gain can be built upon as their understanding deepens. Many schools may be hesitant to engage in these discussions for fear that the conversations will not be developmentally appropriate. It is important to note that at the elementary level, these topics can be thoroughly explored without ever talking about sexual relationships. It is vital to give students the tools necessary to build healthy relationships, set and respect boundaries, think critically about stereotypes, and understand the impact their actions can have on others from a very young age. This foundational understanding can then be applied to intimate relationships as students grow older.

## How can educators engage students in these conversations?

Be engaged and curious.

Genuinely work to understand students' perspectives. Build trust and actively work to create an environment where it is safe to ask questions and share ideas. Provide positive reinforcement to students who share their thoughts by saying things like: "great question!," "thank you for sharing," and "I'm so glad you brought that up, it makes me think of \_\_\_\_\_."

Model healthy consent and boundaries.

At the elementary school age, the conversation around consent is about helping young people understand that they have agency over their own bodies, can set boundaries for themselves, and must respect the boundaries of others. Educators can reinforce these lessons through modeling within their interactions with both students and other adults.

Be prepared to learn alongside your students.

It is possible that a conversation with young people may generate questions that you're not sure how to answer. This is ok! It can be powerful for students to see the adults in their lives seek out additional information, and it is never too late to circle back around to a previous conversation with additional insights.



I could increase my students' exposure to these topics by:

**Building Empathy:**

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**Bullying + Harassment:**

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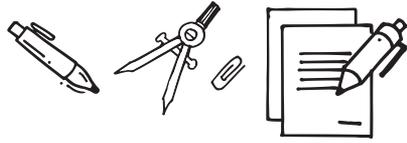
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**Consent + Boundaries:**



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**Breaking Down Stereotypes:**

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**Healthy Relationships:**

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**Some lesson plan ideas I have for these topics are:**

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In addition to creating and implementing lesson plans on these topics, it is important for educators to continue having these conversations in less formal ways each day. Frequent discussions about empathy, boundaries, consent, and healthy relationships will keep these topics at the forefront of students' minds and work to create a school culture where respect is the norm.

One way educators can continue the conversation is to utilize natural ties to these topics within other class materials. School staff can:

- Look for opportunities to talk about these topics within the books students read. When reflecting on literature, ask students to discuss the ways these different topics may have shown up for the characters. Prompt students by asking things like: "What kinds of relationships did you see in this story?," "Did you see the character's boundaries being respected?," and "How would you have felt if you were the main character?"
- Physical education, team sports, and games are excellent opportunities to reinforce lessons on boundaries and consent. Be sure that students are given the opportunity to set boundaries around their bodies and that the conversation about consent continues in these contexts.
- Many of these topics will likely show up in some form within a student's own writing. Prompting students to reflect upon the relationships and characters in the stories they have authored is a great way to continue the conversation.

We also know that topics such as bullying, consent, stereotypes, and relationships are often represented in the media students consume. When youth are discussing music, movies, TV, online videos, video games, and/or current events, educators can utilize open-ended questions to get meaningful conversations started. We encourage school staff to ask things such as: "What do you think about the lyrics in that song?" or "Do you think bullying happened on that T.V. show?"

Teachers can reinforce positive behavior by letting students know when they are doing a great job. You can say things like: "I saw you ask for consent before you borrowed that, thank you!" or "The way you are able to consider that other person's feelings shows me that you are a good friend." This will help to create a school culture that values respect and continuously encourages students to do the right thing.

**Some natural ties to other class work are:**

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Some questions I have about covering these topics are:

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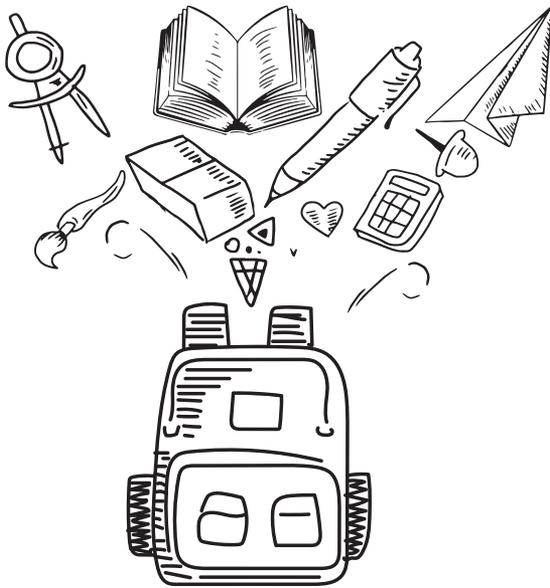
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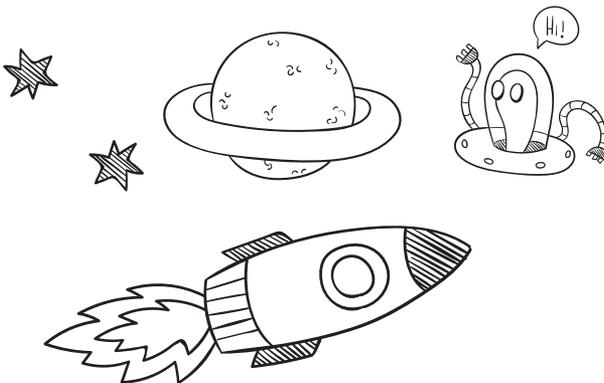
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## Utilize daily culture-shifters to create change.

Daily culture-shifters are strategies that educators can implement every day. Daily culture-shifters may seem small, but over time will help to build a school culture where consent is the norm, stereotypes are not accepted, and violent behavior is not tolerated. Teachers and school staff can:

- Teach students how to give and receive feedback in non-hostile ways. Give students the opportunity to express concerns when they have them and come up with solutions in community with others. For example, some educators have given students the opportunity to either state a compliment or a concern at the end of each classroom activity. This practice serves as both a transition into the next subject and as a method of developing students' abilities to think critically about their experiences. Through this exercise, students can practice expressing their feelings, learn healthy ways to engage in conflict, and be an active part of finding solutions. The process also helps young people learn skills in receiving constructive feedback and making the appropriate adjustments to their own behavior.



- Actively challenge stereotypes. It is critical for educators and schools to encourage the development of social-emotional skills and academic strengths in all students, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, immigration status, or economic background. Be aware of your own biases and actively work against racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia within your community. Ensure that students have equitable access to activities, subjects, and emotional supports. Work to break down stereotypes through intentional lesson plans and ongoing conversations with students.
- Build positive relationships, take time to understand what is going on in students' lives and show that you care. Young people thrive in environments where they know they are supported and cared for by people they trust. Actively work to create a classroom culture where all members of the community are valued.

**I can incorporate these daily culture-shifters in my school or classroom by:**

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## Thoughtfully engage parents, caregivers, and families.

Another critical factor in violence prevention is working to engage students' families whenever possible. The research shows that poor parent-child relationships and unsupportive family environments may increase the likelihood that someone will perpetrate sexual violence.<sup>11</sup> Educators can work to address these risk factors by supporting the relationships that students have with their caregivers and families. Schools can:

- Create space within caregiver-teacher conferences, parent nights, and open houses to share the importance of talking with young people. Discuss school values and prevention efforts with families and encourage them to continue these conversations at home. Parents and guardians can lay the foundation for strong relationships with their young people by being actively curious about the interests that their children have. Caregivers can utilize everyday moments such as sharing a meal, car/bus rides, or bedtime routines to understand what is happening in their child's world and to build positive bonds.
- Encourage families to have developmentally appropriate discussions about consent, boundaries, healthy relationships, and touching safety regularly. Caregivers can reinforce these conversations by modeling desired behaviors with their children and other adults.

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<sup>11</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018, April 10). Sexual Violence: Risk and Protective Factors. Retrieved June 28, 2018, from <https://www.cdc.gov>

- Utilize class assignments as a way to encourage families to learn together. Assignments that ask students to work in partnership with a supportive adult can aid in building connection between a young person and their caregiver. If taking this approach, we recommend broadly defining which adult students can choose to work with, as well as providing the opportunity for students to partner with a school staff person or complete an alternative assignment if they have barriers to doing so at home.
- Engage in ongoing training and conversations with parent/caregiver volunteers working within the school. Ensure that those who may be lending a hand in the classroom or on field trips have a good understanding of the school community's values and appropriately support youth in the same manner.

In addition to incorporating these prevention-focused efforts with caregivers, it is important for schools to consider the impact that both historical and intergenerational trauma can have on families and communities. These cumulative impacts can affect a student and/or caregiver's understanding of the school, a family's participation within the educational community, and a student's access to consistent support within the home. It is important to utilize a trauma-informed approach when engaging with both individual students as well as their families.

## Understand the importance of student leadership.

A valuable way to ensure that violence prevention work resonates with youth is to engage them in the process of developing programming, setting norms, and educating their peers. Schools can:

- Seek out student leadership and feedback on prevention programming efforts. Young people often have very valuable insight on ways to engage other youth in impactful ways. Ask questions like: “Why are these topics important for our school?” and “If you were going to be the teacher, how would you explain these subjects to other students?”
- Utilize a near-peer learning model when possible by providing spaces where students can work to educate other students. This process gives older students the opportunity to engage with the material in a different way and younger students the powerful experience of learning from someone they consider to be a near-peer.

**My school can increase student leadership within prevention programming by:**

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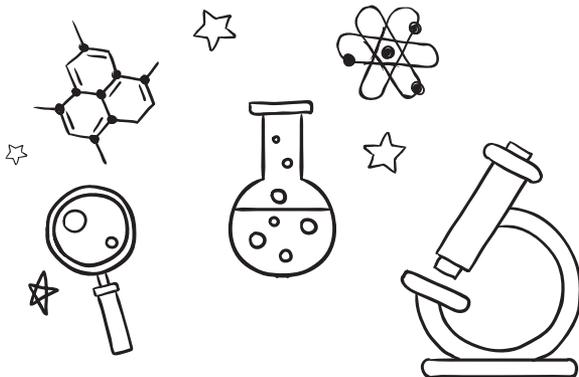
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**Don't forget, you're not alone.**

KCSARC is available to support the efforts of schools and educators within King County. Be sure to check out our online resources that accompany this guide at [www.kcsarc.org](http://www.kcsarc.org) and feel free to email [education@kcsarc.org](mailto:education@kcsarc.org) with any questions.

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