

# Building Strong Connections in the Classroom

*Helping military-connected youth and other new students*

PreK-Kindergarten





**According to USA Facts**, over two million students in the U.S. have a military connection (related to either an active duty or veteran service member). The majority of these students don't actually go to school on base; they could be in your classroom right now!

Military-connected students have unique challenges compared to other students, such as frequent moves, periods apart from a parent and shifting schedules. School can be a place that helps everything else feel manageable. And having a strong connection with at least one teacher can help students, not only with their academic progress, but also with their mental health.

At The Kids Mental Health Foundation, our mission is to provide free resources so that everyone can understand and promote children's mental health. With the support of Bread Financial, we are proud to provide this free resource to help promote mental health and wellness for military-connected students in your classroom.

In addition to this resource, please check out **KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org** for additional free educator resources. Or sign up to receive educator emails at **KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/Sign-Up**.

Kids' mental health starts with all of us – thank you for the difference you make each day for your students.

With gratitude,



Whitney Raglin Bignall, PhD  
Associate Clinical Director, The Kids Mental Health Foundation

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### **Tell us what you think!**

Complete a survey and you'll be entered into a drawing to win a prize! At least 10 educators will be selected.



# Getting Started in Your Classroom

## Who is a “military-connected” student?

A military-connected student is one with a parent/caregiver or close relative who serves or has served (active duty, guard, reserve or veteran) in any branch of the military. Some live on base; many don't. Some feel surrounded by military culture; others feel very alone in it. Their military ties may be obvious or not at all.

## School stressors of military-connected students

Military-connected students have unique challenges compared to other students, such as:

- Frequent moves
- Periods apart from a parent
- Shifting schedules

For some, school is the steady place that helps everything else feel manageable; for others, it can feel like yet another stressor. Stress at home, including missing a parent, preparing for a move or adjusting after their parent(s) return home, can stack on top of school demands. It can negatively affect the student's ability to make friends, focus on school and complete assignments.

## Helping military-connected students in the classroom

- **Belonging:** Military-connected kids could feel different or like they don't fit in. They could be tired of being the “the new kid,” grieving repeated goodbyes and have increased stress due to difficult circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Helping students feel like they belong reduces the long-term impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences.<sup>2</sup>

*Related resources:* [Why School Belonging Matters](#)

- **Friendships:** These students could have challenges in forming and maintaining friendships as they change schools and move often.

*Related resources:* [Building Student Friendships](#)

- **Gaps in education:** Students may be playing catch up in school or repeating things they've already learned in school. Because they move frequently, academics are often disrupted and the identification of special needs or implementations of education services may be delayed. Family transitions may also cause them to have trouble planning and organizing their schoolwork.
- **Mental health:** Students may experience worry or mood swings, stress that may look like irritability or withdrawal and/or physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches.

*Related resources:* [Helping Kids Handle Stress](#)

Despite these challenges, there are many ways to build resilience. **One of the strongest protective factors is positive, consistent relationships with caring adults at school – like you!** When you foster safety, predictability and voice/choice, you help every student, not just those with military ties.

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<sup>1</sup>Allen K. Kern ML. Vella-Brodrick D. Hattie J. Waters L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), 1–34.

<sup>2</sup>Torgerson CN. Love HA. Vennun A. (2018). The buffering effect of belonging on the negative association of childhood trauma with adult mental health and risky alcohol use. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 88, 44–50.



## Myths & Facts Around Military-Connected Children

| MYTH                                                 | FACT                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "They're used to moving; they'll be fine."           | Many students adapt well, but frequent change can still have a negative impact on belonging and focus. Don't assume they'll be fine, but ask the student and their family how you can support them. |
| "When their parent comes home, it fixes everything." | Homecomings are joyful and can also be complicated and complex. This adjustment takes time.                                                                                                         |
| "Needing help is weakness."                          | Mental health can still be stigmatized in the military. Make sure to reframe seeking help as a courageous and strong choice.                                                                        |

### When should I be worried about a student?

If you are worried about the mental health of one of your students, some warning signs could include:

- Withdrawal or isolation
- Sudden grade changes
- Irritability or risk-taking
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches, especially around moves or deployments

Connect with your school counselor/psychologist or administrator and discuss ways to reach out to caregivers to support the student. Parents and caregivers can also reach out to their School Liaison through Military One Source. You can also visit the [Military Child Education Coalition](#) (MCEC) or [the National Veteran's Memorial & Museum's](#) resources for additional help.

## What You Can Do to Help

### Getting started...

- If you're unfamiliar with the military, familiarize yourself with some of their common phrases or lingo.
  - Related resource: [Common acronyms](#)
  - Related resource: [Ways the general public can help military-connected children's mental health](#)
- This packet includes **five different activities** for student check-ins, helping you get to know your military-connected students, and helping them get to know students in your classrooms. When activities are just for certain grades, it will say that in the upper right-hand corner of the activity sheet.
  - These activities are meant to be helpful for all students but were created with military-connected students in mind.
- Consistent classroom routines may anchor them when life at home is changing.
  - Predictable schedules and clear expectations help them feel grounded and ready to learn. Post agendas, break tasks into clear next steps and give advance notice of changes.

- For students who join in the middle of the school year, do what you can to help them get used to your classroom routines.
- Early, caring check-ins help make a difference. Take time to get to know the student.
  - Many military-connected students bring leadership, adaptability, responsibility and global awareness. Find out more through the **Getting to Know You** activity.
  - Encourage students to take on leadership roles, peer-welcoming jobs and projects that highlight service.
  - Introverted students may prefer to journal or connect in smaller groups.
- Integrate activities and ways to create belonging in your classroom to build community. Ideas to get you started:

| Strategy                                                                                                                       | Activities/Suggestions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Increasing belonging<br>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show interest in the student's story at their pace, honoring their privacy.</li> <li>• Help them find their place in your classroom by looking for things that they <b>have in common</b> with other students and what <b>unique skills</b> they bring to the class.</li> <li>• Small, regular check-ins beat intense or lengthy discussion (<b>See Activity Weekly Check-in</b>).</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Helping them make friends<br>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use intentional buddy/welcome systems. The military uses the "Battle Buddy" system, assigning people to travel in pairs to reduce isolation.</li> <li>• If you have an outgoing and welcoming student, consider <b>asking them to serve as an ambassador for the new student</b>, walking with them to classes/lunch/recess/etc.</li> <li>• <b>See the Friend Feature activity</b> or encourage teens to use the <b>Conversation Starters</b> and discuss answers.</li> </ul>                                                                                 |
| Validating and expressing emotions<br>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students of all ages can benefit from identifying their feelings. They may seem sad but actually be angry about having to move and leave their friends. Asking questions using the <b>Conversation Starters</b> may help.</li> <li>• Saying things like, "It makes sense this is hard" or "That sounds really difficult" instead of "Well, you need to figure it out" or "A lot of other kids have challenges, too."</li> <li>• Teach calm-down strategies (like <b>mindfulness</b> or <b>belly breathing</b>) and model problem-solving language.</li> </ul> |
| Celebrating military-connected students<br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• April is the month of the military child.</li> <li>• Consider reading a book in class from <b>our reading list (see page 7)</b> or doing a special activity.</li> <li>• Younger kids may enjoy coloring sheets with military themes.</li> <li>• Teens might want to create a slideshow of service members from across the school that can be displayed throughout April.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                           |

### ***When family transitions happen...***

Because kids often have to move or miss school, help them prioritize what's most important. When possible, extend deadlines to give them more time.

When military-connected students tell you they will be moving soon, consider what documents you can send to their new teacher/classroom to help them transition smoothly.

You are not alone in this! Reach out to others to collaborate and support these children:

- Coordinate with counselors, family and the command/unit sponsored support network for military families called a Family Readiness Group (FRG).
- Ask about moves and returns and try to make sure everyone is on the same page.

**Privacy note (OPSEC):** Military-connected children are often told to be careful what they share about their loved one's mission/deployment/etc. Avoid unnecessary questions or ask the parent or caregiver for details if you need more information. Focus on helping the student feel supported.



## Recommended Reading

We've compiled this list of books that may be helpful for your classroom. *We encourage you to read them first to make sure they are appropriate and meet the requirements of your school.*

### Helping the Whole Class Understand Military Families

- *When Dad's at Sea*, Mindy Pelton (5-8 years)
- *Brave Like Me*, Barbara Kerley (3-5 years)
- *Petunia Moves Again*, Miranda Kogon Montoya (3-9 years)
- *Who Is Sam the Soldier?*, Erin Morris (5-9 years)
- *Ginny Off the Map*, Caroline Hickey (10-14 years)

### Helping Kids With Deployment

(suggested as an individual read with a child or suggest to families)

- *Lily Hates Goodbyes*, Jerilyn Marler (ages 2-7)
- *A Paper Hug*, Stephanie Skolmoski (ages 4-8)
- *Countdown 'Til Daddy Comes Home*, Kristin Ayyar (ages 4-8)
- *Love, Lizzie Letters to a Military Mom*, Lisa Tucker McElroy (ages 4-8)
- *Sometimes We Were Brave*, Pat Brisson (ages 5-7)
- *Ginny Off the Map*, Caroline Hickey (10-14 years)

### Helping Kids Through Grief

- *Hugs on the Wind*, Marsha Diane Arnold and Vernise Elaine Pelzel (ages 4-6)

### Read Aloud or Discussion Books for Tweens and Teens to Help Them Understand Others' Lived Experiences

- *Ginny Off the Map*, Caroline Hickey (10-14 years)
- *WhatsHisFace*, Gordon Korman (9-13 years)
- *Hazard*, Frances O'Roark Dowell (9-14 years)
- *Military Kids Speak*, Julia Rahm (10-16 years)
- *Second in Command*, Sandi Van (14-17 years)
- *Not Now, Not Ever*, Lily Anderson (14-17 years)

For more book recommendations for a variety of ages, visit your local library or the [National Veteran's Memorial & Museum's book list](#).



## Activity 1: Getting to Know You

This one-on-one activity allows you to learn more about your military-connected students.

- For younger students, you will need to walk them through the sheets. Or you could send it home for them to complete with a caregiver and then review it when they bring it back in.
- For older students, you may give it to them and ask them to fill it out and turn it in. Then, you can schedule time with them to discuss some of their answers.

## Activity 2: Weekly Check-Ins

Can be used with all students, different versions for each age group

The purpose of this activity is to give you a **snapshot of how your students are feeling**. It gives students an opportunity to **pause and reflect on how they're doing**. These may help you build an ongoing relationship and notice changes or trends over time.

1. For each age range, there are five activity sheets provided. Make as many copies as you need for your class.
2. Hand them out and collect them when they're complete. You may choose to give them back after you've reviewed them, create a binder where they're kept for students or discard them.
3. You can decide when and how to use the check-in. If your goal is to build relationships, it would be ideal to use at the same time each week, as part of a routine.

Early Childhood Instructors: You will likely need to walk the students through the activities.

## Activity 3: Conversation Starters

Use the Conversation Starters to have conversations one-on-one or with the whole classroom. If you use it with the whole classroom, you may choose to skip the military specific questions and just ask those one-on-one or with a smaller group of military-connected students.

Some teachers have told us they use Conversation Starters at lunch tables to spark conversation; others use them in homeroom or circle time.

One question from the younger student conversation sheet is specific to the military. For the tweens and teens sheet, there are four questions about being related to someone in the military.

Feel free to use any of the questions with tweens and teens.

## Activity 4: What Do We Have in Common? (BINGO Game)

Can be used with all students

Instructions vary based on age range. For elementary and middle school:

1. Explain that students will be trying to find others in the class who they have something in common with.
  - Ask questions based on each box, such as “Do you have an older brother or sister?”
  - If the other student says yes, write their initials (each student should write on their own sheet).
  - Students must also ask one follow-up question to check off that box. This encourages students to talk more and get to know their fellow classmates.
  - Explain that students should try to match five boxes in a row from five different students.
2. Encourage them to use this activity to practice their friendship skills.
  - First, introduce yourself to your classmate. “Hi, my name is X. What is your name?”
  - Then, ask them a question about the box. For example, if the box says, “plays soccer,” ask, “Do you play soccer?” Most of the time, you can start your question with ‘Do you...?’

Activity 4 — **What Do We Have in Common?**

Use this as a greeting activity or game. Using a spinner, dice or random number generator, call up a student and once they've spun/rolled a number has been selected, ask them the question corresponding to that number.

You can encourage more interaction by asking others to clap if that's something that they like too.

Consider watching the GoHuddle video on [How to Make a Friend!](#)

|                               |                                        |                                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1                             | 2                                      | 3                                          |
| What is your favorite food?   | What is your favorite color?           | What is your favorite animal?              |
| 4                             | 5                                      | 6                                          |
| What is your favorite season? | What is your favorite movie/show/game? | What is your favorite thing to do at home? |

Get more resources at [KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](#)



### Tell us what you think!

Complete a survey and you'll be entered into a drawing to win a prize! At least 10 educators will be selected.



# Getting to Know You

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

I live with: *(circle all that apply)*

Mom   Dad   Grandparent   Other family member   Other caregiver: \_\_\_\_\_ (name)

I have \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s) and \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)

**My favorite animal is \_\_\_\_\_.**

Draw a picture of that animal.

**Draw a picture of where you live.**

Color the circle with your favorite color.

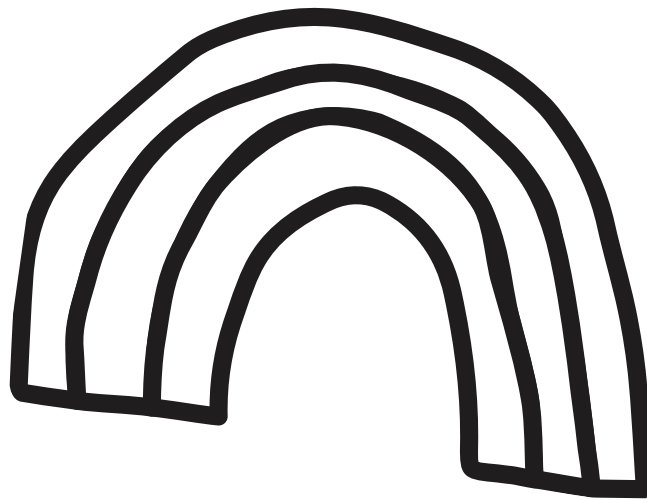
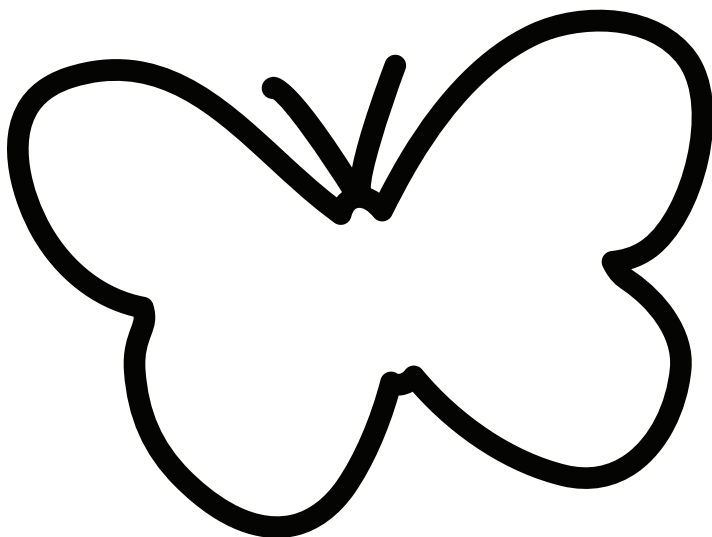
What games do you like to play? Or what do you enjoy doing?

## Week 1 Check-In

How are you feeling today?



Draw or write something you are thankful for.



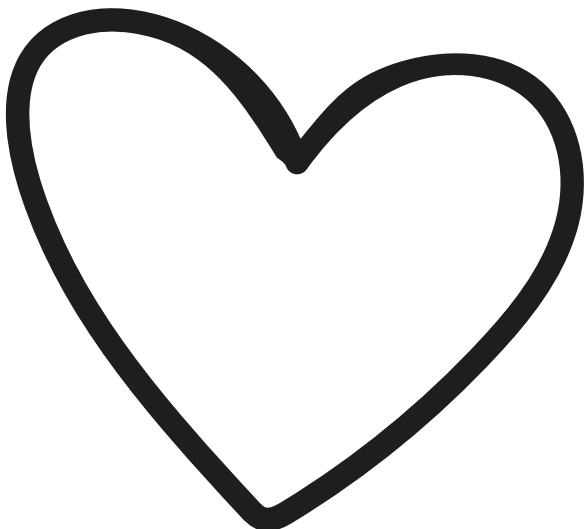


## Week 2 Check-In

How are you feeling today?



Draw or write something fun you did this week.

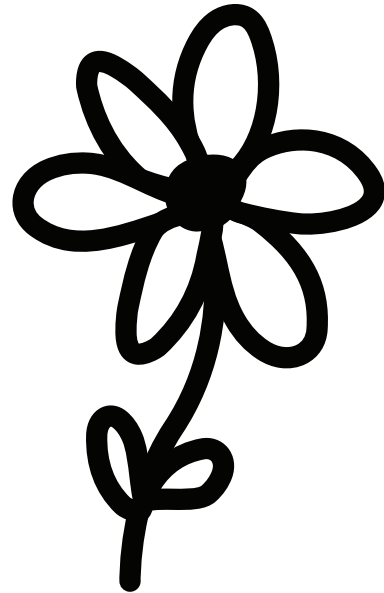
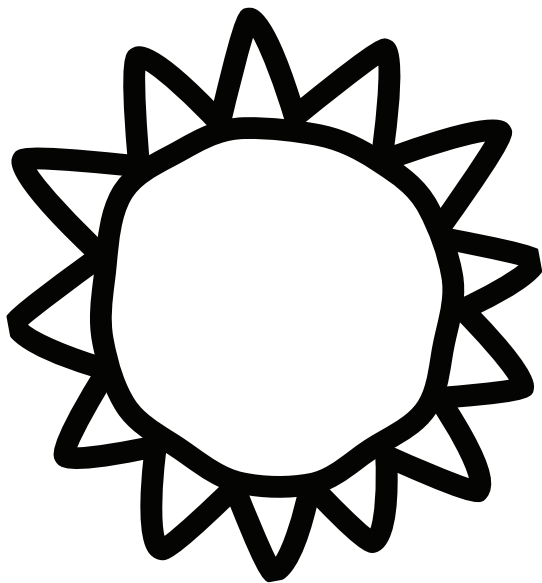


## Week 3 Check-In

How are you feeling today?



Draw or write something you do well.

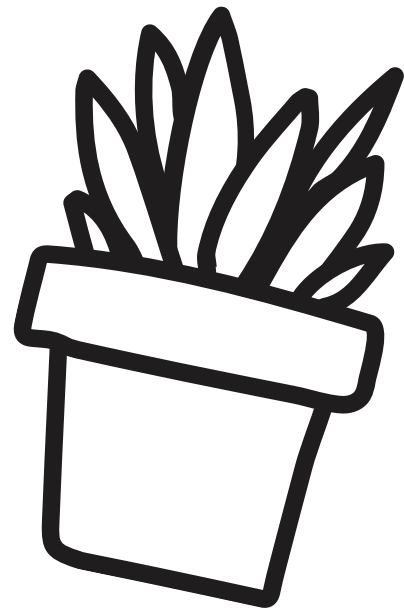


## Week 4 Check-In

How are you feeling today?



Draw or write something you're looking forward to.

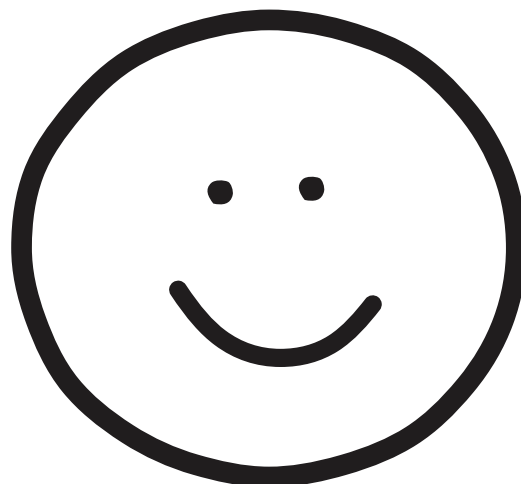


## Week 5 Check-In

How are you feeling today?



Draw or write something that makes you happy.



## Conversation Starters

**Conversation Starters**

What's something funny or exciting that happened today?

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**Conversation Starters**

If you could create a new holiday, what would it be about?

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**Conversation Starters**

What's your favorite thing about yourself?

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**Conversation Starters**

Name 3 things that make you smile.

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**Conversation Starters**

Can you draw or tell me about your favorite part of your day?

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**Conversation Starters**

What's your favorite place you've lived so far?

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**Conversation Starters**

What's something cool about being part of a military family?

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**Conversation Starters**

What do you like most about meeting new friends at new places?

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**Conversation Starters**

How big are your feelings today?  
(Tiny like a mouse, big like a dinosaur or somewhere in between)

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**Conversation Starters**

What do you do to feel calm if things around you feel too noisy or busy?

 The Kids Mental Health Foundation™



## What Do We Have in Common?

Use this as a greeting activity or game. Using a spinner, dice or random number generator, call on a student and once they've spun/rolled/a number has been selected, ask them the question corresponding to that number.

You can encourage more interaction by asking others to clap if that's something that they like too.

Consider watching the GoNoodle video on [How to Make a Friend!](#)

| 1                                    | 2                                             | 3                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What is your favorite food?</b>   | <b>What is your favorite color?</b>           | <b>What is your favorite animal?</b>              |
| 4                                    | 5                                             | 6                                                 |
| <b>What is your favorite season?</b> | <b>What is your favorite movie/show/game?</b> | <b>What is your favorite thing to do at home?</b> |

## Dear Parents & Caregivers,

Your student has been learning about mental health and wellness with activities from The Kids Mental Health Foundation.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation's mission is to give expert-created resources and tools to all U.S. communities so that **everyone can understand and promote mental health for children**. Our free resources focus on mental wellness topics including happiness, coping with feelings of anxiety, mindfulness, helping kids make friends and more.

Here are a few topics you may be interested in:

- **Routines**
- **Screens, Social Media and Technology**
- **How Belonging Boosts Mental Health**
- **Starting Conversations**

All of the materials on our website are free and yours to download and share.



You can get more mental wellness information by signing up for our weekly newsletter at [KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/Sign-Up](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/Sign-Up).



   [#KidsMentalHealthFoundation](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org)  
[KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org)

At The Kids Mental Health Foundation, children's mental health is our mission. That's why we've partnered with organizations to share mental health lessons, full of tips and resources that can help your child grow.

If you'd like to learn more about children and mental wellness, feel free to check out our website at [KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org).

## Queridos padres y familiares,

Tu estudiante ha estado aprendiendo sobre salud mental y bienestar con actividades de The Kids Mental Health Foundation.

La misión en The Kids Mental Health Foundation es brindar recursos y herramientas creadas por expertos a todas las comunidades de EE. UU. para que **todos puedan entender y promover la salud mental de los niños**. Nuestros recursos gratuitos se enfocan en temas de bienestar mental así como la felicidad, cómo manejar sentimientos de ansiedad, atención plena (mindfulness), cómo ayudar a los niños a hacer amigos y mucho más.

Aquí hay algunos temas que pueden interesarte:

- **Rutinas**
- **Pantallas, redes Sociales y tecnología**
- **Cómo el sentido de pertenencia mejora la salud mental**
- **Cómo iniciar conversaciones**

Todos los materiales en nuestro sitio web son gratuitos y están disponibles para que los descargues y compartas.



   #KidsMentalHealthFoundation  
[KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/es](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/es)

En The Kids Mental Health Foundation, la salud mental de los niños es nuestra misión. Por eso nos hemos asociado con organizaciones para compartir lecciones de salud mental, llenas de consejos y recursos que pueden ayudar a tu hijo a crecer.

Si quieres aprender más sobre los niños y el bienestar mental, visita nuestro sitio web en **[KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/es](https://KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org/es)**.