



Gil Noam Ed.D., Dr. Habil
The Inner Life of Students

The Psychological Challenges for Students and Teachers Ahead

Three immediate things we can do to help them.

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Source: August de Richelleu/Pexels

By Gil Noam and Stephanie Wu

Right now, the entire country is consumed by back-to-school debates. The well-being of our children is tied to our ability to ensure that students are able to learn and parents can work. Life is already stressful for most American families, and not knowing how or when schools will open adds extra hardship.

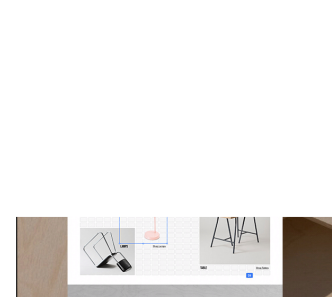
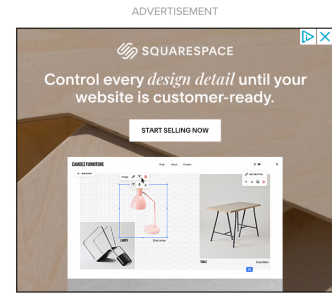
We believe there are concrete things that we, as educators, policymakers, parents, and adults who work with young people, can do to help students and schools navigate the challenges and disruptions caused by COVID-19. Distance learning is or will be a reality in many school districts and we will need to use this virtual space much more wisely and skillfully than we did last spring. If adults can step outside the sense of helplessness and frustration they are experiencing, together we could make a powerful shift that boosts learning, mental health, and the holistic well-being of students and teachers.

At [The PEAR Institute](#) at Harvard University and McLean Hospital, we predict, based on previous disasters, that mental health disorders will reach levels of around 30% of the entire child and adolescent population, nearly 17 million school-aged children in the United States. This is a substantial increase from the 13-20% who suffer in any non-pandemic year, including millions of students who experience the insidious effects of poverty and racial injustice.

A purely clinical solution is not feasible. We lack enough mental health practitioners to meet the growing need. Furthermore, treating every problem as an individual issue needing a clinical solution isn't necessarily a good choice for everyone or society at large. Mental health is not only an individual experience—it is also communal. As one of the most important communities for youth, our schools must play a vital role in promoting the holistic well-being of students, teachers, and other school staff.

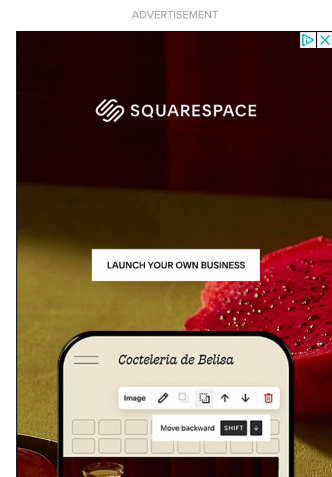
Prioritizing positive relationships and social-emotional skills, such as [resilience](#), connection to community, and self-management, will help us avert a serious public health emergency now and years into the future, while supporting students as they re-engage and recover from significant learning loss. This is, of course, easier done in person, but can also happen in virtual environments.

This moment requires our schools and communities to pay as much [attention](#) to the mental health of students as we pay to their grades, attendance, and engagement—for all are interwoven with learning and growth. Developmental science shows that [anxiety](#), stress, and [trauma](#) prevent our



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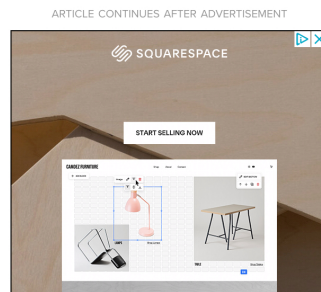
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ability to focus, organize, cooperate, and retain information. Encouragingly, research and practice show it is possible to counteract chronic stress by creating safe, structured, and responsive educational environments.

Here are three steps we can take immediately, gleaned from partnering with schools during the pandemic:

Relationships First. Design a time for students to connect with the same peers and adults every day. Use this time to develop strong relationships, trust, and purpose. Research has shown that positive relationships are at the core not only of learning but of survival and long-term physical and mental health. Learning environments that are consistently engaging and nurturing help students to feel a sense of belonging, exercise leadership, explore new ideas, and achieve goals. Profoundly formative, students gain the know-how of resilience, empathy, teamwork, meaning-making, empowerment, and voice. These skills help students navigate change, overcome setbacks, and gain confidence during adversity.



Some people may think this skill-building requires students to be physically in one place—like a brick-and-mortar classroom. But we have found ways to engage groups of students online, establish norms and rituals, and assure that everyone can express themselves freely. It takes adjustment, but remember, our students are digital natives and very adaptable.

Integrate Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Identify instructional strategies that, alongside academic content, include students practicing social and emotional skills, as these competencies advance achievement as well as mental health. Several organizations, all part of a national movement of educational transformation such as [CASEL](#), [Attendance Works](#), [Search Institute](#), [SoLD Alliance](#), and others, including our organizations, have published free, online resources that are readily available to help parents and educators integrate social-emotional development; master virtual approaches to learning; improve student engagement; and help children and adults feel psychologically safe in online spaces.

Prioritize Educator Mental Health. Teachers are under tremendous pressure. They need proactive mental health support in the form of empathic relationships with colleagues, administrators, and families; opportunities for voice and collaboration; and time to make collective meaning of their experience. The dual benefit is increasing teacher resilience will also strengthen their use of these strategies with students in virtual environments.

Hard times are accelerating mental health disorders and trauma responses in both children and adults. We have a chance to create learning environments where everyone can experience more hope, connection, and well-being. A holistic approach is the mental health boost we need while waiting impatiently for a COVID-19 vaccine.

Stephanie Wu is City Year's Chief Transformation Officer and leads the development of City Year's [Whole School Whole Child](#) services. As a founding staff member of City Year, she has overseen the development and scaling of City Year's youth development practices that remain foundational to City Year's work in more than 300 public schools in 29 U.S. communities.



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About the Author



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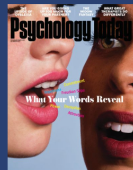
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