

ADVISORY: A Dynamic Approach - CHECK-INS

Purpose

- To establish open, trustworthy conversation within the group
- To create a stronger sense of community among the participants
- To enable youth to express their needs and develop a support system

Key Skills

- Listen effectively
- Self-awareness
- Thoughtfulness
- Thinking of others

Context

Check-ins are dedicated time designed for students to share with others within their group what's going on for them: feelings, thoughts, experiences, questions. Initially, there may be healthy skepticism about how much to reveal. Over time, as trust and goodwill grow, students typically become more willing to share openly. One important reason for establishing group agreements or norms is to set the stage for students feeling safe, knowing that what they disclose is confidential (within the appropriate school safety guidelines). A bonus from check-ins occurs when students develop the ability to say what kind of support they need, whether it be on an emotional level or related to something academic. This can build a sense of mutuality, knowing that others are thinking about them. It can be as simple as a word of encouragement, a nod from a classmate as they walk through the halls, a call to check in between classes.

While the term check-in largely applies to quick sharing—5-10 minutes—at the start of a class or meeting, it can be expanded to an entire session. This may be scheduled or happen spontaneously. Perhaps there has been a powerful event in or outside school that needs talking through or, far less dramatic but concerning, when something arises that affects every student (for example, there is a deadline to turn in a huge report and anxiety runs rampant). Or after returning from a school break, there's a drive to reconnect and get the pulse of how everyone is feeling.

There are many different types of check-ins. It helps to diversify check-ins so that they are something students look forward to and model different ways to initiate sharing about one's self and developing mutual understanding. It's best when students sit in circle so that they all see each other and can pay and receive attention.

Prior to the first check-in (with occasional reminders as needed), review group agreements, particularly if there is one around "shared time." If, for example, you have less than ten minutes for a check-in and the first person takes seven minutes, that leaves little time for others. Ask students what they think "shared time" means and how to be mutually respectful for all the group members. Also discuss if there may be exceptions. A student may bring up something that truly needs more time; when this occurs, you can always acknowledge the exception and adjust the agreement.

Here are a number of examples of effective check-ins. Most can be tightened or expanded to fill the time available. Be sure to remind students that when expressing a response to "how do you feel?" or "how are you?" it is preferable to avoid general adjectives like "cool," "fine," "good," "okay," or "alright" because they are used so much in everyday conversation that they lose meaning.

Share and Support Check-In

Ask each student to write on a piece of paper a sentence—ten words or less—that sums up how they are feeling, something on their mind, or generally how their day (week) is going. Ideally done in a circle, you can do one round to get a general sense of how everyone is doing. A second round could involve students stating what support they would appreciate from the group during the week between meetings.

Note: Writing Before Speaking

Having students first write down a response avoids what typically happens in groups: the first person to speak influences what each person says thereafter. By writing down a personal response, students are more likely to adhere their own feelings or thoughts when it is their turn to speak. Developing integrity, Finding and staying true to their own voice are critical skills for youth. Use writing before speaking often! The practice also encourages students to be reflective, especially those students who need more time before generating a response.

Opting Out, Opting In

For many different reasons, a student may want to “pass” during a group check-in. This can be stated ahead of time as an acceptable option. Of course, we aim for every student to feel willing and comfortable participating. It may be advisable to check-in one-on-one with a student who is continually reluctant, and, also, to vary the dynamic. Having paired then small group check-ins may build a sense of safety for some students. Also include non-verbal check-ins to see how everyone responds. See “In Silence.”

The Mindful Check-In

Here, the student first takes a deep breath, collecting their thoughts prior to actually speaking. This gives students a moment to consider how they really feel—in the present moment—and then, when ready, to share it with the group. Students might share an emotion (e.g., sad, happy), a physical feeling (e.g., I’m really tired right now, I am bursting with energy), or even a mental experience (e.g., overwhelmed with thoughts, worried about an ill grandparent). The key is that they *first take a deep breath and then check in about how they’re feeling in the present moment.*

The Open Check-In

The open check-in gives students the most flexibility in how they want to check-in. They could talk about how they’re feeling, a past experience, something they’re hoping for, usually for a flexible amount of time. However, something to be aware of with this check-in is time. This may be a good check-in when the rest of the time together isn’t packed. It helps to decide on how many minutes the group would like to allow.

The One or Two Word Check-In

In contrast to the open check-in, the one or two-word check-in encourages students to share how they’re feeling without extra conversational qualifiers. Students must bring their awareness to their primary experience and summarize it with one or two words. Again, avoid using non-descriptive, everyday adjectives like “good,” “cool,” “fine,” “okay,” or “alright.”

The Metaphorical Check-In

The metaphorical check-in uses metaphor to help students describe what they are feeling. Here are two examples.

—**Internal Weather Report:** In this check-in, students compare their feelings to the weather. They can feel like there's a sunny day inside (e.g., happy, joy), like it's gloomy and grey (e.g., bored, down), rainy (e.g., sad, depressed), stormy (e.g., irritated, angry, etc.), or unpredictable (e.g., explosive, creative) anything else they can think of.

—**Current Playlist:** The music metaphor compares music to feelings. *What instrument is currently playing inside you right now?* or *“What music or song best represents your feeling right now?”* or *“If your mood could be represented by music right now, what would it be?”* Encourage each student to answer in their own way, whether they speak about an instrument, particular song, album, or musician.

The Silent Check-In

Students share, in silence, how they are. This can be with an emoji drawn on a piece of paper, with a facial expression, or with everyone standing and taking a pose. To extend this idea, the second round could be, *how would you rather be*, and repeat the process. Next could be having a round to share how to get from here to there, or allowing, in silence, students to write a list or process they would follow to make that transition.

The Zip Around Check-In

Ideal for a short opening, ask “What’s going on for you?” and zip around to find out from each student. If they know it’s a “zip” process, they are likely to be concise.

“I Need Help With” Check-In

Many people shy away from asking for help. How about a time devoted to making asking for help become a norm? Be sure to go first and model what you need help with. This could be a time to write before speaking.

Bring an Artifact Check-In

Decide as a group that next week everyone will bring in an artifact—something personal that no one else knows—to share. Set up a support system for person-to-person reminders to bring in the item so that everyone comes prepared.

What’s New? Check-In

After an extended break, a simple “What’s new?” may be enough to spark sharing.

Student Led Check-In

After a few experiences, invite students to plan the check-ins. They may decide to plan in pairs or groups of three, being sure to run their idea past you beforehand.