

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.

