

## eSmart Guidance: How buddies can help us get back to school

After weeks of remote learning, a new challenge is emerging: how to ensure a supportive, connected community as students return to school.

### Isolation took its toll

While teachers have done amazing work to keep their students connected, lockdown was hard on some students. For example, a [study](#) of nearly 1,000 New Zealanders found that during lockdown young people were more likely than their elders to have struggled emotionally and less likely to have connected positively with other people.

Playtime with peers is vital to the development of [young children](#), and close friendships are crucial to [teens](#). Both these things have been hard to access recently. Our wellbeing also depends on brief, pleasant encounters with people we don't know well; these [incidental contacts](#) were another casualty of lockdown.

### Returning to school can be stressful

Many students worry about things like:

- Renegotiating [friendship groups](#)
- Being [away](#) from family
- Being [bullied](#)
- Facing racism
- Seeing ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends
- Being rejected by other students
- Not wanting to socialise.

According to a [survey](#) of 611 parents in the U.K., more than a quarter of children returning to school are worried about managing changes to their friendships that occurred during lockdown, and a third are worried that they won't be able to be near their friends when school resumes.

Some problems were there already: for example, even before COVID-19, around [1 in 12](#) Victorian Year 5 students did not agree that they felt connected to their peers.

### Buddy programs can help recovery

After natural disasters, experts recommend that schools consider running 'buddy programs' to help students [transition back](#) to school, build [social connectedness](#) and [confidence](#), and get [emotional and academic support](#).

A '[buddy program](#)' pairs older students with younger ones in supportive, structured and facilitated relationships, in order to:

- Encourage a friendly school culture
- Help new students settle in
- Build students' confidence and social skills
- Help students to feel welcomed, understood and valued
- Encourage older students to show leadership and build skills.

Buddy programs fit within Domain 3 of the eSmart framework, whereby schools provide authentic opportunities for students from different year levels to interact in formal and informal settings.

### What makes a successful buddy program?

1. **It has strong staff engagement.** A coordinator manages and promotes the program and teachers oversee the buddy relationships, with strong support from school leadership.
2. **It's large scale.** The program involves whole year levels, with several years' difference between the older and younger students. The program is backed by whole-school celebrations and themed events, and is promoted to parents and local businesses. The program is long-running – e.g. a full year.
3. **It's planned carefully.** Students are paired thoughtfully, considering factors like maturity, personality, sex, and any disability or vulnerability. 'Understudy buddies' are available if a student is away. Activities are held regularly – e.g. weekly. There are clear processes for resolving concerns, and the program is monitored and evaluated. Teachers are trained in relevant topics such as trauma or disability access.
4. **Students lead fun learning activities.** Older students lead the younger ones in activities like reading books, playing sport, writing letters, learning tech skills, or creating art, videos, stories or science projects. Students work cooperatively, building skills together.
5. **Students are well supported.** Older buddies are trained in social skills like encouraging and negotiating, and any skills needed for the activities themselves. Older buddies receive regular feedback from teachers and opportunities to support each other. There must be clear expectations about students' roles – e.g. how a buddy is different to a teacher, and how to ask adults for help if something goes wrong.
6. **Student voice is prioritised.** Students partner in designing the activities and improving the program, and they reflect regularly on how the activities and relationships are going.
7. **Activities run in welcoming, comfortable spaces.** Some schools create special spaces like 'buddy benches', which should be celebrated as attractive, positive places in which to make friends. Students rehearse using the spaces, play there, and take pictures there.
8. **There's a wider context:** A school-wide commitment to end bullying and teach social and emotional skills such as fair play, negotiating, sharing, taking turns, listening, respecting everyone, cooperating, being kind, and welcoming others.

### To learn more...

Teachers wishing to strengthen their buddy program or start a new program can explore [Better Buddies](#), an initiative of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation. Better Buddies pairs students in their first year of primary school with an older buddy, to help the younger students feel safe, welcome and connected, and to help the older students feel valued and

respected. The guiding values are: caring for others, friendliness, respect, responsibility, valuing difference, and including others.

[95%](#) of participating principals said Better Buddies helped create a friendly, caring school environment, and 97% of teachers said the program helped students in their transition to school.