

Routines

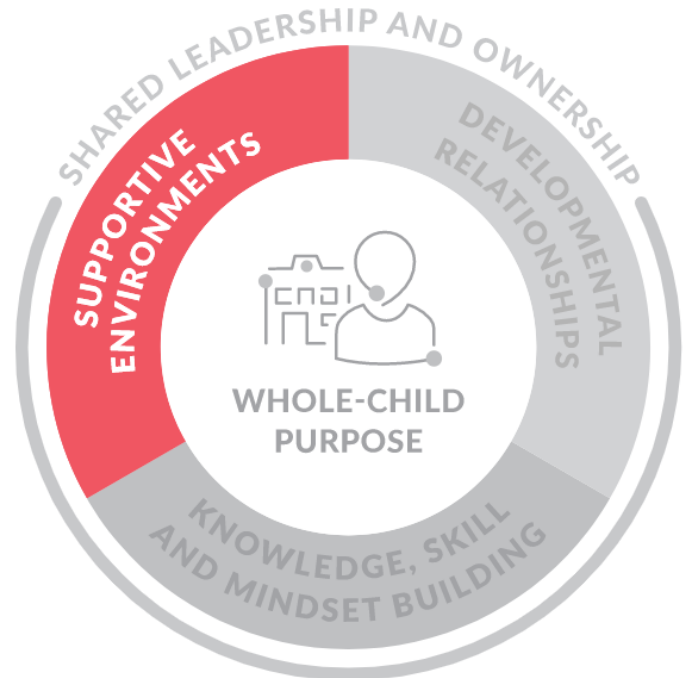
This brief is the third in a four-part series, [Relationships, Routines, Resilience: Reopening with the Three Rs](#), designed to share some of the key practices, strategies and structures to support students' return to in-person school. Each brief includes the science grounding, implications for practice, and resources.

THE SCIENCE

Our brains are prediction machines. They naturally seek to create order in our environment. When there is chaos or disorder, our brains work hard to figure out patterns and make sense of our environment. This work means that our brains have less capacity to dedicate to other tasks, like following directions or doing academic work. In order for students to be able to focus on learning, we need to create supportive, predictable environments.

This is important for all students, and **especially those whose brains and bodies are already on “high alert” for danger, due to chronic stress or trauma.**

The predictability and consistency of a supportive school environment gives a hyperactive stress response system the opportunity to categorize the pattern of experiences as non-threatening, thus allowing the nervous system to stay out of “fight, flight, or freeze” mode and in an open, engaging, and learning mode.



THE PRACTICE

A supportive school environment is physically, emotionally, and identity safe, while creating a strong sense of belonging. Predictable routines - for example, norms and expectations - set the context for students to be engaged in learning. Routines are effective when students have the opportunity to practice, allowing their brains to go on autopilot and freeing up working memory for other tasks.

Routines reinforce a sense of belonging by creating a safe and supportive environment. At the same time, having a sense of belonging increases students' commitment to maintaining routines. A true sense of belonging requires an authentic commitment to sharing power and voice with all community members – students, staff, caregivers, etc. – practicing inclusion even when it is difficult. This means designing together the school culture itself (e.g., co-creating classroom norms), as well as prioritizing mechanisms of support and repairing relationships, instead of only discipline, when challenges inevitably arise (e.g., using co-regulatory and restorative conversations). As all voices are invited into

the conversation, it is especially important that those with power are aware of how their identities and relative institutional positions affect their role in creating a supportive school environment.

Creating that sense of safety means we must understand the difference between striving towards calm versus co-regulation. There are times in schools where a calm environment is supportive to learning – but demanding calm at all times is not responsive to students’ developmental needs nor is it consistent with a commitment to dismantle, white dominant norms. In classrooms where students must always be quiet and composed, adults may also be prioritizing their own need for comfort and control, as well as missing a fundamental opportunity to support students’ self-regulation skills. Instead, a co-regulating environment provides: a predictable and consistent structure students can rely on; adults who are attuned and responsive to students’ needs in the moment; and the level of engagement and energy required for students to meet their goals.

Creating that sense of safety also means we must be willing to ask: Is this dangerous, or does it cause discomfort for adults? Often, behaviors or even students are implicitly or explicitly labeled as dangerous, unsafe, or problematic, because of biases, cultural differences, or a need for adult-only control – and consequences are given accordingly. In fact, to keep our students (especially those who hold marginalized identities) safe, it is likely that there will be productive discomfort.

In summary:

Supportive Environments are NOT:	Supportive Environments ARE:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Always highly rigid, structured, and educator controlled for the sake of calm, quiet, and order ● Relying on exclusionary discipline practices to maintain safety ● Mirroring oppressive societal structures that unfairly police students’ bodies and choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Physically, emotionally, and identity safe for all community members, especially those who hold marginalized identities ● Inclusive, creating an unwavering sense of belonging ● Co-regulating, predictable, and consistent, especially for students who have experienced chronic stress or trauma

RESOURCES

- ❑ Turnaround’s Toolbox for Whole Child Design – [Supportive Environments](#)

Specific tools include:

- Norms and Expectations Planner – Guidance and sample strategies for developing school or classroom norms and expectations, with an emphasis on co-creation, shared power between students and adults, and acknowledging and affirming diverse cultural values and perspectives.
- Co-Regulating Routines Planner - A guide to creating consistent and predictable routines that are co-regulating and create a sense of safety, while upholding norms and supporting student skill development and autonomy.

- ❑ Greater Good Science Center’s [California SEL Modules](#)