



As students return to our classrooms they are going to be full of emotion – and we can help them find release

As our elementary students head back to school during this turbulent time, there will be many emotions stirred up in them. Alarm. Frustration. Worry. Excitement.

And this will be mirrored by what we, as educators, may also be experiencing. On top of what we may be emotionally experiencing ourselves, we are being called to be the caring leaders that guide our students to a place where they can learn together. We all know that this going to be challenging. Very challenging.

We need to expect that our students will be arriving to us with their emotions stirred up. And we know that when emotions get stirred up, they need somewhere to go. Finding healthy ways to pre-emptively channel this emotional energy for our students can help to alleviate dangerous or disruptive eruptions in our classrooms.

Understandably, the last thing we may feel like is doing is planning for how to help our students to release emotion. We are already planning the many changes to our physical space, health regulations, and how we will learn together. And yet, if we do make plans for how to help our students to release the alarm and frustration whirling inside of them, they are going to cope better – and we are going to cope better.

So, what can we do?

This is not the time for anything complicated. We need simple and easy activities that can help kids to release some of what is inside of them.

We can make sure to provide a release activity every day. This can be especially helpful for supporting students to get out frustration before it leads to outbursts of aggression. These outlets can also help students to reflect on and express their feelings in natural ways that don't make them feel self-conscious. Some general ideas for helping kids to release the emotion inside of them are:

- playing and/or listening to music
- physical movement
- stories or storytelling
- journaling
- poetry
- drama
- art – even free style doodling!
- simply being outdoors

Below are three activities from the Inside-Out Handbook; the companion guide to the book *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down than Ever – and What We Can Do About It*

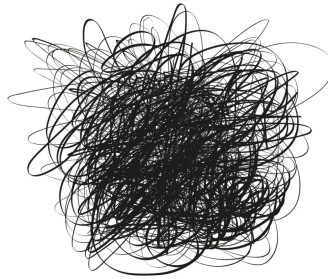
These activities can help your students:

- **GET IT OUT** by releasing pent-up physical and emotional energy. This is especially helpful for supporting them to release frustration that can lead to outbursts of aggression in class.
- **FEEL** by reflecting on and expressing their feelings in a safe way. This helps them to build consciousness around their feelings, which is essential for them to develop impulse control, emotional maturity, and resilience, as well as embark on a path of self-discovery.
- **CARE AND CONNECT** by awakening caring feelings while in safe spaces to be themselves and express their individuality. By offering our students experiences that support them to express their own individuality, while also becoming more attuned to others around them, we can help them not only appreciate what they have in common with each other but also build respect for difference. As a result, their sense of empathy can awaken, and more inclusive and caring communities may be the fruit of these experiences.

These release activities can be facilitated while maintaining social distancing practices. You can facilitate these same activities often as children will enjoy engaging in them as part of their daily routines. If you are looking for new activities to try, you can go to reclaimingourstudents.com

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Release activity #1: Scribble Time!



What age groups does this work for?

This is a great activity for kids ages four to eleven.

What do you need to make it happen?

- one large piece of paper per student
- one dark pencil crayon per student (note: wax crayons tend to break when scribbling hard, so pencil crayons are best)
- fast-paced music

How do you do it?

- Give each child a large piece of paper and a dark pencil crayon.
- Tell them that they get to scribble as hard and as fast as they can—but they can only scribble when the music starts! And when the music stops, they have to FREEZE!
- During the exercise, stop and start the music repeatedly at varying intervals, so that students can't anticipate when they will have to freeze.
- Once done, you can make a scribble wall and hang all the scribbles up. Or after everyone is done, each person crumples their scribbles into a ball and throws them into the recycling.

What's the benefit?

Scribbling is such a natural thing to do when one has pent up energy that many kids often do this on the side and edges of their schoolwork on their own. This activity harnesses this natural tendency to scribble but increases and enhances the release experience.

Telling them they have to scribble and can't stop until the music does empties more stores of physical energy. And having music on during the experience can increase the emotional energy they direct into it. In this way, when they are done scribbling, they often have nothing left. And on top of it, boy, can it feel good to be given permission to draw messy and fast and to not worry about it!

Helpful tips

This activity works best if the music you select has a lot of energy and is almost frenzied. Think big music, strong emotions—opera! Drums! Bees buzzing!

Music suggestion:

Title: The Four Seasons—Summer in G Minor, RV. 315: 111 Presto

Artist: Adrian Chandler, featuring La Serenissima

Album: The Four Seasons & Concertos for Bassoon and Violin “in tromba marina”

Release activity #2: Drawing the Music

What age groups does this work for?

This is a great activity for kids ages four to eighteen.

What do you need to make it happen?

- one crayon or pencil crayon per person
- one large piece of paper per person
- music (see below for music suggestions)
- masking tape (optional)



How do you do it?

- Give each child a large piece of paper and a crayon or pencil crayon. It is best to give each student only one crayon or pencil crayon, so that they can focus on listening to the music in this activity and allowing it to guide their drawing.
- Explain to your students that they are going to “draw the music.” Tell them that they get to draw how the music sounds and feels to them. It doesn’t matter what their drawing looks like at all! They can simply scribble, let their hand move solely to the beat and volume of the music, or they can draw specific things—it is entirely up to them. I often say to my students, “Imagine that I can’t hear anything at all, but just by looking at your paper, I can see what the music sounds and feels like to you!”
- It also helps to give students cues that help them connect what they hear to what they feel and therefore what they draw. For example, maybe as the music goes faster, they might want to draw faster. Or when the music becomes louder, they might want to make their drawings bigger! Or if the music sounds like dots to them, they can make dots all over their page. There is no right or wrong way to draw the music!

Modifications for ages nine and up

- For students nine and up, you can add to the experience by having them close their eyes.
- For those students who are not comfortable closing their eyes, you can suggest that they look up, rather than down at their paper, or they can try mostly closing their eyes.
- It is also a good idea to turn off all bright lights, close the curtains, or dim the lights to help students focus less on what they see.
- If possible, it is a good idea to use masking tape to secure paper to each student’s desk, so they can feel the edges of their paper with their hands, rather than relying on their eyes.

What’s the benefit?

This exercise supports students to connect to their feelings and experience release, as it does not ask them to think about drawing a specific thing, or even try to draw a specific thing. Instead, students have permission to be led by the music and to simply draw what the music tells them to do. For older students, having them close to their eyes enhances the sensorial experience and the release, as they are less likely to feel self-conscious if they focus only on what they (and others) can hear, not what everyone can see.

Helpful tips

For each session of this activity, try playing two very different pieces of music. For example, start with music that is fast and wild-sounding, and then do the exercise with music that is calmer and more soothing. It is also a good idea to play different music each time you try this activity, so that your students have a different experience each time.

Musical suggestions include:

Fast:

Title: “The Final Countdown” (Live version)
Artist: Melo-M
Album: Live at Riga Congress Centre

Calm:

Title: “Abraham’s Theme”
Artist: Vangelis
Album: Chariots of Fire

Release activity #3: Be the Conductor You Are the Music



What age groups does this work for?

These two activities share the same basic elements, with developmentally appropriate modifications for children in different age groups. Be the Conductor is for kids ages four to eight, and You Are the Music is for kids ages nine and up.

What do you need to make it happen?

For these activities, you need rousing music that is unlikely to be familiar to your students. Do not use Top 40 or other popular music, as your students will already have associations for how they “should” move to that kind of music, which undermines the benefits of the activity. Instead, choose instrumental, drumming, or even nature sounds like a wild hurricane.

Here are some music suggestions:

Title: “The Heart Asks Pleasure First”

Performers: Munich Philharmonic, John Harle

Album: The Piano: Music from the Motion Picture

Title: “A Different Drum”

Artist: Peter Gabriel

Album: Passion: Music for The Last Temptation of Christ

How do you do it?

- Have the students spread out across the room facing you so that they can follow your lead. Ensure that each student has plenty of room to move, with no other student within 6 feet of them. (Providing visual spot markers for where students should stand will help.)
- Once everyone is on their spot, pretend that you have “glue” in your hands and rub the “glue” on the bottom of each of your feet. Have the students follow you and also pretend to “glue” their own feet down. Everyone should now be standing in their own spot with their feet “glued” down.
- Now, explain that when the music starts, everyone is going to conduct an orchestra with just their arms and bodies—but they can’t lift their feet!
- I recommend that you also participate in the activity, facing your students. But let them know that they do not have to copy you—that they should just follow the music. For example, if the music is fast, then so are their movements! If the music is slow, then they should also slow down.
- To help your students transition in and out of the activity, tell them that they can “unglue” their feet when the music stops. It is important to structure activities to contain the experience for them, and that will make it easier for you to transition students in and out of activities. It is also helpful to explain “start” and “stop” cues before beginning.

Modifications for ages nine to eleven

For students ages nine to eleven, this exercise works best when they have their eyes closed. This helps them feel less self-conscious and nervous, and it ensures that they can benefit from the sensorial experience and release. If they are not comfortable closing their eyes, you can instruct them to look down at the floor or try to mostly close their eyes and only peek through their eyelashes.

Before you begin, let the students know that it is as if *they* are the music. That it is as if the music is going to go into them and direct their movements. They will not have to think of what to do: they simply have to let the music lead them. For example, if the music goes fast, so do their arms, fingers, etc. If the music slows down, so does their body. Even if your students close their eyes, it is still important for you to face them and engage in the same activity. Your presence at the front of the room, modelling and participating in the same exercise, will help support those children who might hesitate to participate otherwise (especially those who will be tempted to peek!).

What’s the benefit?

This activity encourages students to engage parts of their body that they may not typically use when they are active. Being “forbidden” to use their legs, they will automatically begin to use their arms, hands, fingers, face, head, knees, and torso to release physical energy. Additionally, this activity can help easily channel built-up frustrated energy, as a child does not have to think about what to do. Most children find it very easy to follow the music. In this way, there is less thinking and more releasing. Furthermore, when older children do this activity with their eyes closed, it helps them better tap into their internal feelings.

Helpful tips

Dimming the lights can help create a warmer and more comfortable atmosphere for everyone, regardless of the age group.