

# Recognise emerging distress

A suggestion for implementing the strategy

'Be proactive' from the Guide: [Behaviour and learning](#)

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## **Includes:**

Ensure students are known

Watch for external and internal behaviours

Read the room

Monitor overload

Recognise the onset of sensory overload

Consider readiness for challenges

Inclusive Education

From

Guide: [Behaviour and learning](#)

Strategy: [Be proactive](#)

Suggestion: [Recognise emerging distress](#)

Date

18 June 2026

Link

[inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/recognise-emerging-distress](https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/recognise-emerging-distress)

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## Ensure students are known

Get to know and understand each student and identify potentially difficult times or situations that may be stressful or difficult for them.

Keep up-to-date and maintain an interest in a student's life beyond school.

This will help you to:

- eliminate or minimise situations that may cause unnecessary stress, for example, changes in routine, rushing, illness, sensory overload, taking turns, being reprimanded in front of others, things happening at home.
- identify the student's personal signs of stress or unhappiness and intervene early.
- have a timely conversation with a student about what you have noticed and how to develop coping strategies.
- more accurately interpret wider classroom or playground behaviour and pre-empt potential areas of conflict.

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## Watch for external and internal behaviours



Source:

[Alexandra Koch](#)

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Remember, ākonga can express feelings outwardly or internalise them. Pay attention to unusually quiet behaviour as well as “loud” exhibitions of behaviour.

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## Read the room

Take the pulse of the room. Act when it feels “off”, using your experience to make changes before they turn into problems.

- Begin by building rapid rapport and connection.
- Connect with ākonga using verbal and non-verbal techniques.
- Pay attention to your own emotional responses.
- At the early stages of distress, you may be able to distract or redirect ākonga. Note that distraction and redirection do not address underlying issues. This means they may be ineffective in the long term.
- Be aware that as challenging situations escalate and emotions heighten, calm logical processing ability is very diminished. It is unlikely that ākonga will be able to think or hear much, so keep messages simple and consistent.

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## Monitor overload

Students experience cognitive stress and overload when a task or situation is overwhelming.

As cognitive fatigue accumulates through the day and week, it may impact self-control and heighten sensitivities.

- ✓ Regularly connect with the student and parents/whānau to discuss their workload and what is happening at home.
- ✓ Work with the student and their family to prevent overload. For example, negotiate in advance the expectations around completing tasks.
- ✓ Find out what the signs of the student being overloaded are.
- ✓ Find out what triggers overload for the student.
- ✓ Discuss with the student what support they need to self-manage when they are overloaded. For example, use a break card, withdraw to a quiet space, tell the teacher they are overloaded.

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## Recognise the onset of sensory overload

Always monitor the impact of the sensory landscape of your learning space.

Ask for feedback from students.



Video hosted on Vimeo <http://vimeo.com/52193530>

Closed Captions

Source:

[Interacting with Autism](#)

<https://vimeo.com/52193530>

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## Consider readiness for challenges

Being proactive does not always mean removing stressors.

Completely removing things that create stress will mean ākongā do not have the opportunity to build skills. On the other hand, when the level of challenge exceeds ākongā ability to cope, it is likely to lead to distress and harm.

Strong relationships help us to know ākongā and to know what works for them, what causes distress and what level of challenge they are ready for.

Decisions about actions depend on many complex and interrelated factors such as ākongā readiness and how the day is going for all parties. It is important to be flexible and to be kind to everyone involved, including yourself.

Sometimes quick easy solutions are the right choice. For example, moving jostling students apart. At other times, they are not the right choice because they don't address underlying issues.

Simply moving students apart may ignore underlying issues such as not understanding the task, social or relational problems, or the need for movement breaks.

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