

What Are Check-Ins?

Check-ins are very short, structured conversations that give mentors a way of asking “How are you?” in different ways, and give mentees easy ways to say more than just “I’m fine” or “okay.” Check-ins are a ritual used for starting sessions, and they’re designed to lead the conversation into small discoveries or new insights about one another. Check-ins can also add a bit of shared laughter to stressful times.

The Purpose of Check-Ins

Check-ins are a useful structure to help a mentor:

- **Reconnect** with a student after time apart
- **Learn** what is on a student’s mind
- **Talk** with a student about personal or school-based concerns and successes

How Mentors Can Use Check-Ins

Check-ins are designed to take approximately 5 minutes and can be used to begin every meeting with a student.

However, a mentor can easily extend a check-in well beyond 5 minutes by:

- Asking additional reflection questions
- Focusing on a student’s specific concern or success
- Further developing a conversation that arises naturally from the check-in structure

Any check-in found in this section can be used:

- A single time in a school year as one of a variety of check-ins used with a student
- Repeatedly throughout a year as a familiar ritual

Tips for Using Check-Ins Successfully

A few things for mentors to keep in mind:

- It may help a student feel more comfortable participating if you participate and answer first. This will also help model the directions and avoid confusion.
- Be mindful that if a mentor shares too much, a mentee can actually feel overwhelmed or up-staged. Share enough during an activity to show your willingness to be open, but not so much that the time together is spent focused on you.
- Always ask follow-up questions. Examples of questions to deepen the conversation are provided for you at the bottom of each check-in, but you can use any questions that are appropriate to what the student has shared.

- When you first begin using check-ins, student may not respond with long answers at first. You can encourage more engagement by using open-ended questions, but be careful not to push too hard. Trust that the more you meet and get to know each other, and the more familiar check-ins become, the more your student will open up.
- If the student discloses a problem, explore whether it was resolved, what steps have been taken to solve it, or how you might be able to help the student think through the concern. You may want to check in about this problem the next time you see this student, too.
- Celebrate! If the student shares an achievement or something he or she is proud of, take time to offer genuine, specific praise for the accomplishment.

The Good, The Bad, and The Funny

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind

Materials

- None

Directions

1. Ask the student to take a minute to think of an answer to the following question:
 - What is something *good*, something *bad* or *frustrating*, and something *funny* that has happened to you in the time since we last met?

If the student is helped by writing down thoughts before sharing, encourage him or her to write down a few short notes.

2. Share your own response to the first part of the question only – something *good* that has happened to you since the last time you met. Make sure to be descriptive.
3. Next, invite the student to respond to the question of something *good* that has happened since the last time you met.

Use active listening skills to show you are listening carefully; you may ask for some further detail to fill in the picture of what happened, but don't yet ask any deepening questions until after the student has shared all three experiences.

4. Repeat in 2 more rounds, with you first offering your *bad* before your student does, and you first offering your *funny* before your student does. Again, use active listening skills, but don't ask any real probing or deepening questions yet. **NOTE:** If your student really can't connect to one of the 3 categories of *good*, *bad*, *funny*, then just skip it and go where he or she is most comfortable.
5. Once the student is finished responding, both of you take turns asking questions about the details behind each of the *good*, *bad* and *funny* situations.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- What *good* things are you looking forward to in the next week?
- When you are *frustrated*, or experience a *bad* situation, who helps you get through it?
- What makes you *laugh* even when you are having a tough day?

Where I'm at Today

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind
- TALK** about stress

Materials

- A copy or drawing of the *Where I'm at Today ...* continuum
- Pens/pencils

Directions

1. Place the *Where I'm At Today* continuum between you and your student. Explain that a little stress might help keep us on our game, but too much and we can feel overwhelmed. Stress can mess with our ability to concentrate or motivate us to work harder.
2. Ask the student to draw a star and write today's date anywhere on the continuum, even in between the markers, to indicate his or her stress level *today*.
3. Next, ask the student to think for a moment about how today's stress level feels. Ask the student to look at the words listed below the continuum and place a star next to the words that most accurately describe the feeling that stress brings up for him or her. If the student would like to add words to describe the feeling of stress that aren't on the list already, encourage him or her to write in the space provided.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- What do you think is causing your stress today?
- When you are stressed at school, what do you do? Who or what makes you less stressed?
- When is stress helpful?
- What are some ways a person in a mentor role can help you with the situation causing stress?
- What is one positive action step you can take immediately to change the situation that is causing your stress?



Consider using the continuum during several upcoming meetings. Keep the continuum for the student and, each time it is used, place a date next to the student's response. Discuss not only the immediate stressors, but also ask about how the student's stress changes over time.

If using the continuum more than once with a student, you may ask the following questions: According to the marks on this continuum, what has changed over time? What has remained the same? What factors do you think contribute to this?

Where I'm At Today

Draw a *star* and put *today's date* anywhere along the continuum to show today's level of stress:



Today my stress/lack of stress level feels like (place a star next to all that apply):

Anger

Tension

Calm

Sadness

Nervousness

Happiness

Frustration

Anxiety

Relaxation

Fear

Excitement

Optimism

List any other words that describe your stress today:

Three Words

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind

Materials

- None

Directions

1. Explain that there is an art to conveying feelings or situations in a brief way – song lyrics and poems are a great example of this. During a few quiet minutes, each of you should decide on *just three words* that answer the question:

- What's going on in your life these days?

Encourage the student to think beyond “mad, sad, and glad” and be as creative as possible. You may want to give some examples such as:

- A single piece of news: *Big Test Tomorrow!* or *Need Some Sleep* or *Achieved My Goal*
- 3 separate descriptive words: *Busy, Stressed, Hopeful*
- A word picture: *Smooth, calm sailing* or *On a rollercoaster*



If it is helpful to the student, provide pen and paper to use for sketching, writing or brainstorming, but encourage the student to use what comes to mind first, if possible.

2. Offer your three words as a way of sharing and modeling the structure. Next, invite the student to share his or her three words.
3. Once you have both shared, take turns asking each other questions about the meaning you each hoped your words would send.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- How difficult or easy was it for you to come up with just three words about how you are doing? Why do you think it was tough/easy for you?
- What are you most looking forward to in the near future? What are you dreading?
- When someone asks you “What's going on these days?” what is your regular response? How do you decide what to say about your life and what to hold back?

Lyrical Life: A Mashup

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind

Materials

- Sheet of paper
- Markers in 2 different colors

Directions

1. Both you and your student take a few minutes to think of or jot down your responses to the following 2 questions:

What's one lyric from a song that describes how this week going?

What's one lyric from a song that describes something that would make this week better?

2. Next, choose a marker that will be your color throughout this activity and write your first lyric on the paper. Next, ask the student to choose a different color marker and write his or her first lyric on the same paper, right beneath yours.

Repeat this again, still using the color of markers you both initially chose, so that right underneath your first pair of lyrics, you and your student write the second lyric you each used to answer the second question.

3. Take turns reading your lyrics aloud.
4. Spend time asking the student why he or she chose those specific two lyrics to share and how those lyrics connect to current things he or she is experiencing. You may also share some information about why you chose your lyrics (as long as the focus stays on your student, overall).
5. *(Optional)* Explain that you both will do this check-in several times over the course of the year, adding to the same page with the same colors. This process will create a “mashup” of lyrics that will tell a story of your year.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- Is there an artist you like who always seems to be talking about you or your experiences through song?
- What music do you like to listen to when you are happy? When you are angry? When you need motivation?
- What is it about music that has the power to help us express our emotions?

(Optional) When looking at the page of lyrics together after doing this check-in several times:

- Looking at our mashup of lyrics, what story do they tell about us? What might be the title of this poem/song we have created?

High/Low

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind
- TALK** about concerns and successes

Materials

- None

Directions

1. Ask the student to think of a high point and a low point in his or her life since you last saw each other. Suggest that he or she can choose to talk about:
 - School (classroom experiences, homework, cafeteria, phys ed)
 - Friends (plans, activities, rumors, arguments, supports, questions)
 - Family (parents/guardians, siblings, interactions)
2. Model this activity and begin the sharing by describing a *low* point in your week. Next, ask the student to share his or her *low*.
3. In order to end on a more affirming note, next share a *high* point from the time period since you last met. Next, ask the student to share his or her *high* point.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- *Lows:* What support would be helpful to you in dealing with your low point, and from whom? Is this a low point that is likely to repeat? Do you have any control in whether or not it repeats? What *do* you have control over, when it comes to how you handle this low point?
- *Highs:* Is there something we can celebrate as an ongoing high point? Are there other high points you're expecting or trying to make happen in the near future? What's an area of your life where you'd really like to have a high point, even if you haven't had one there lately (or ever)? Any steps you can take in creating such a high point?
- What is the benefit in sharing our lows with each other to start our meeting? What is the benefit of talking about what our best moments were? Who else in your life do you share your low points and high points with?

Top of Mind

This check-in will help you to:

- LEARN** what is on a student's mind
- TALK** about distractions

Materials

- None

Directions

1. Ask the student to think of the *top three* things on his or her mind today and explain that you will both answer the following questions:
 - What are 2 things that are at the top of your mind today? They can be from any area of your life.
 - How did these things that are on your mind either (a) help you create your day in a positive way or (b) get in the way for you during the school day?

Give your student a moment to think of his or her answers.

2. Share your answer to the questions first, as a way of modeling the structure. You may choose to share just one of your answers to the question and then invite the student to give all of his or her answers in order to give the student more talking time.
3. Spend some time talking about any details of the top 2 things on the student's mental list that could be helpful in problem-solving or celebrating with the student.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- What are some things that tend to distract you during your school day? What do you find happens in school (with teachers or friends or just on your own) when you let yourself get really distracted?
- What are some things that help you to stay focused on school, during each school day? What do you find happens in school (with teachers or friends or just on your own) when you're able to stay focused?
- What are some new refocusing strategies that might help you when you're really distracted in school?

Three Wishes

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind

Materials

- None

Directions

1. Read the following question to the student and take a quiet minute to allow you both to think of a response.

If a magical creature appeared and granted you three wishes that would change your day (not your LIFE, but just this day!), what would you wish for? The only rule is that you may not make a wish for more wishes.

2. Next, repeat the question and decide together who will share their response first. After one person has shared his or her three wishes, the other person also shares. Each of you should also share how you think your day would change if your wishes were granted.
3. After both sets of wishes are shared, each person should ask follow-up questions to learn more about the details behind the other person's wishes.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- Do you make wishes? When are you most likely to make a wish?
- Since we don't really have a magical opportunity to make our wishes come true, what can you do, within *your* power, to improve your day?

Finish My Sentence

This check-in will help you to:

- RECONNECT** after some time apart
- LEARN** what is on a student's mind

Materials

- Sentence Starters* cut into strips
- Pen/pencil for each person

Directions

1. Place the *Sentence Starter* strips face-up on the table so that both you and the student can read them.
2. Invite your student to choose a sentence starter he or she would like to complete. Explain that you will choose one of the other sentence starters and each of you will complete the chosen sentence by writing on the slip of paper.

Take a quiet minute to allow each of you to write your response.

3. Begin by reading your completed sentence aloud. Next, invite the student to read his or her full sentence aloud.
4. Use the student's response as a jumping off point to have a larger conversation about what is going on in his or her life:
 - *If your student's response to the sentence starter was positive, you might ask:*
What is going to keep today moving in a good direction?
 - *If your student's response revealed frustration or a tough situation, you might ask:*
Do you want to talk more about what's going on?
What support would you like in taking action steps toward making a positive change?
5. If there's time, you can each select another set of sentence starters to complete and share, following the steps above.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- Where else in your life are you able to check in with someone and share, for real, how your day is going?
- How do you think your response today is connected to [*a topic/issue previously discussed, or a goal this student set*]?

Sentence Starters

I'm looking forward to...

This morning I...

I don't feel great when I think about...

I really need to...

I really want to...

My day would be going much better if...

I can't stop thinking about...

I hope...

What if...

I can't believe...

Someone I've really appreciated lately is... because

If I Could ...

This check-in will help you to:

- ☑ **RECONNECT** after some time apart
- ☑ **LEARN** what is on a student's mind
- ☑ **TALK** about dreams and goals

Materials

- ☐ *If I Could ...* statement starters cut into strips

Directions

1. Place the statement starter strips face-down on the table, or folded in a bowl so the words cannot be read. Explain that *If I Could ...* is a way to help you both take some time to daydream together and get to know each other better.
2. Model the structure by picking up one of the statement starters, reading it aloud, and completing the sentence. To encourage the student to share more than just a few words, complete the statement in your own words and then give a brief explanation, or additional information, about the daydream you shared.
3. Next, invite the student to respond to the same sentence stem.



Both of you should use the follow-up questions on the strip of paper to learn more about each other's daydreams, or create your own follow-up questions.

4. After both of you have responded to the *If I Could ...* statement, ask the student to choose a different sentence stem and read it aloud. In this round, the student should respond first, and then invite you to share after he or she has answered any follow-up questions.
5. Continue in this way, taking turns being the first to respond, for as long as time permits.

Deepening the Conversation

Following are examples of questions that help you move from brief check-in to a deeper conversation with your student:

- How can dreams help us figure out our goals and wishes?
- When do you notice yourself daydreaming? When you do, where does your mind wander off to?
- What is the benefit of sharing your dreams with others?

If I Could ... Statement Starters

If I could wake up anywhere in the world, I would wake up in...

Follow-up questions:

- *Why there?*
 - *What would you do while you were there?*
-

If I could spend an entire day any way I wanted, I would...

Follow-up questions:

- *Who would you want to spend your day with, if anyone?*
 - *What would you do differently in morning, afternoon, or night?*
-

If I could have any super power, it would be....

Follow-up questions:

- *How would you use this super power?*
 - *What is a skill in real life that a person can have that might be related to this super power? Who do you know that skill?*
-

If I could be famous for one talent, I'd be famous for....

Follow-up questions:

- *Is this a talent that you currently have?*
 - *What are things about this talent that interest you?*
-

If I could change anything about myself, I'd change...

Follow-up questions:

- *What is it that makes you want to change this aspect of yourself?*
 - *If this is something in your control to change, what series of steps might you be able to take toward this goal in the next few months? What support would you need in taking these steps?*
 - *If this is something that is not in your control to change, what is it, do you think, that makes this aspect of who you are hard to accept? What kind of support might help you to accept this aspect of who you are?*
-

If I could accomplish one thing this year, it would be...

Follow-up questions:

- *What/who could help you to accomplish this goal? What gets in the way of you accomplishing this goal?*
 - *What are some action steps you could take during this year that would move you toward this goal?*
 - *How would you celebrate this accomplishment?*
-