

Spring 2026

Tulare County
Office of Education

Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools

BHS NEWSLETTER

Spreading Mental Health Awareness, Psychoeducation, and Inspiration



“Children rise on branches still growing, our role is to witness with wonder, protect their footing, and trust the strength unfolding within them.

-Rosie Rincon Hernandez, EdD, LCSW, PPSC

Bi-Annual Newsletter

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Hello Readers! This newsletter is intended to inspire and bring awareness.

Welcome to our BHS newsletter. We are glad you're here!

With each new season, our committed graduate interns collaborate to share timely insights, helpful resources, and evidence-based strategies, all aimed at supporting the mental health and well-being of students, families, and educators.

To the right, you can reference this issue's topics.

We thank each and every reader for their support and interest in learning and promoting mental wellness in their lives, classrooms, and community.

We invite you to share your thoughts and ideas for future newsletter topics by scanning the QR code at the end of this issue.

With thanks,
Rosie Rincon Hernandez,
EdD, LCSW, PPSC

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IMAGINATION

Why Creative Play Matters



Imagination is essential for healthy brain development in childhood. Recent research underscores that imaginative and pretend play go beyond recreation; they are critical for cognitive growth, emotional regulation, and social functioning. Engaging in creative play activates multiple brain areas, promoting neurological stimulation and long-term brain health. One significant benefit of imaginative play is its impact on executive functioning, which includes skills like working memory, attention control, and cognitive flexibility. Studies show that children who regularly engage in pretend play develop stronger self-regulation skills, crucial for managing impulses and maintaining focus, particularly during early brain development ([Scientific Reports, 2025](#)).

Imagination also enhances cognitive creativity and problem-solving. Activities like block play encourage children to generate original ideas and explore various solutions. [Kao et al. \(2025\)](#) indicates that preschoolers involved in STEAM-based imaginative play experience consistent growth in creative thinking and performance, reinforcing cognitive resilience and adaptability. Emotionally, pretend play provides a safe space for children to express and explore their feelings, aiding in the development of coping strategies and emotional awareness, which are vital for mental health. This type of play is linked to improved emotional regulation and stress management during early formative years. Socially, imagination cultivates empathy and interpersonal skills. By assuming roles and collaborating on narratives, children practice communication and perspective-taking, enhancing their social interactions and peer relationships.

[Bredikyte & Brandisauskiene, \(2025\)](#) suggests that pretend play encourages cooperation and understanding of social norms, contributing to healthy social-emotional development. From a neuroscience perspective, imaginative activities strengthen neural connectivity and improve executive functioning by enhancing attention and working memory. Thus, play-based imagination is vital for the brain's ability to adapt, learn, and grow. In today's fast-paced, screen-filled world, fostering imagination in children is more crucial than ever. Through play and creativity, children not only have fun but also build their brains and learn essential life skills ([Child Mind Institute, 2024](#)). Creating space for imaginative play supports healthy development now and paves the way for lifelong well-being.

Coping with Change



Nature shows us that change is constant and necessary. Seasons change from winter to spring, then to summer, and into fall, and the cycle continues. Think of a flower: it starts with a seed, and with time and care, it grows into a beautiful flower during springtime. Take the humble caterpillar. So vulnerable and small, yet with time and, more importantly, change, it soon becomes a marvelous butterfly. Change could be good and often necessary to fulfill a greater purpose.

Yet, what if change feels overwhelming, surprising, or scary? Feeling this way is understandable because we often cannot predict what will happen after the change. However, there are ways we can manage difficult thoughts and uncomfortable feelings that may come with change. First, we acknowledge that change can be difficult to manage. Moving to a new school, moving into a new home, beginning a new friend circle, or even welcoming a new family member into our home, all cause uncertainty in their lives. Once we understand our emotions and thoughts, we find ways to cope and manage. Here are some practical ways to manage challenging transitions ([Guttman, 2024](#)).

- **Be comfortable with the uncomfortable:** Be comfortable with the idea that discomfort does not last forever.
- **Accept change:** Use self-talk to remind yourself that the only way forward is through.
- **Have a strong support system:** seek support from friends and family so you can express your feelings. Being able to express yourself is very important during these transitions.
- **Self-care:** During challenging transitions, it is easy to forget to take care of yourself. Remind yourself that to go through these changes properly, you must prioritize your well-being above all. Take part in activities that nurture your mind and body.
- **Technology:** Limit your screen time or delete apps that could result in more feelings of anxiety until you have fully transitioned into your new environment.

Transitions could be tough, but so are you. With the right tools, support, and mindset you can embrace change for the good.





Movement is the Way

It is a well-established fact that exercise is incredibly beneficial for our overall well-being. Engaging in regular physical activity not only enhances our physical health but also significantly contributes to our mental well-being. In fact, a growing body of research indicates that "Exercise is one of the most evidence-based tools for improving mood" (Aubrey, 2026). This profound impact on our mood can be attributed to the release of a myriad of 'feel-good' chemicals during exercise, often referred to as the 'runner's high.' These beneficial substances, including serotonin, endorphins, and dopamine, are well-known for their mood-enhancing properties. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the release of these chemicals can be just as effective as traditional antidepressants (Aubrey, 2026).


Moreover, exercise offers additional cognitive benefits by enhancing brain function through the release of brain growth factors. Dr. Nicholas Fabiano from the University of Ottawa has famously referred to exercise as "Miracle-Gro" for the brain (Aubrey, 2026). But how exactly does this work? A crucial protein known as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) plays a pivotal role in facilitating memory and learning by fostering the growth and connectivity of neurons (Seabury, n.d.). Engaging in physical activities has been shown to stimulate the production of these vital proteins.

Integrating physical activity into our daily lives transcends the mere pursuit of looking fit; it is essential for enhancing our mood, promoting optimal brain health, and significantly increasing our lifespan. By prioritizing exercise, we invest not only in our physical wellness but also in our mental clarity and overall quality of life.


References:

Aubrey, A. (2026, January 12). Exercise is as effective as medication in treating depression, study finds. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/12/nx>

Exercise and cognitive function. Seabury. (n.d.). <https://seaburylife.org/exercise-and-cognitive-function>



Family Media Plan



As we shift into spring, growth and change happen all around us. It is an ideal time to reset, not just with cleaning out closets, but with how we're using screens in our homes. Technology is part of our daily lives, and although it brings convenience and connection, research has shown that excessive screen time can affect sleep, mood, focus, and emotional regulation in both children and adults (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.). Kids who spend long periods of time on devices may struggle more with irritability, attention, and self-control. At the same time, adults experience increased stress, sleep disruption, and reduced presence when screen use becomes excessive. Since children often mirror what they see, parental screen habits strongly influence how children use media.

Creating intentional screen-free time can significantly strengthen parent-child relationships and support emotional well-being. Simple boundaries like phone-free meals, setting a consistent "screens off" time before bed, or choosing one evening a week for a shared activity can create space for meaningful conversations and connection. Activities such as going for a short walk, playing a board game, cooking together, or engaging in creative projects allow families to reconnect in ways that screens sometimes interrupt. The goal is not to eliminate technology, but to bring awareness and balance into daily routines.

Modeling healthy screen behavior is especially important. When parents demonstrate self-regulation with their own devices, children are more likely to follow that example. Having open conversations about why screen limits matter can help children understand that these boundaries are about health and connection, not punishment. The American Academy of Pediatrics also offers a free, customizable "Family Media Plan" to help families set healthy and realistic screen boundaries together (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.). Spring offers a natural opportunity to slow down, spend more time outdoors, and purposely focus on presence within the family.

Reference: American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). Family media plan. HealthyChildren.org. <https://www.healthychildren.org>



FINANCIAL LITERACY FOR CHILDREN

-Tatiana Ruelas



What is money? What can you do with it? How do you earn it? These are common questions youth think about in their effort to learn about financial literacy. Knowledge of money will benefit them throughout their lifespan.

Financial literacy is very important for everyone to learn about, as it can have life-long benefits and consequences. Below are topics and activities that you can use to teach your children financial literacy.

Topics caretakers can teach children:

- Earning money, whether through chores or a lemonade stand.
- Spending and budgeting.
- Giving, such as donations, offerings, helping others in need, or gifts of appreciation.
- Learning about bank services, such as checking, savings, loans, and credit cards.
- The risks of impulse shopping and peer pressure purchases.
- Learn and practice delayed gratification, such as saving money to purchase a preferred item weeks later rather than immediately.

Activities to teach children about money:

- Practice with pretend money, such as playing "store".
- Sorting pictures into "Needs vs. Wants".
- List what they want and recognize whether they already have it (gratitude).
- Decorate a piggy bank or goal jar.
- Read [financial literacy for kids books](#).
- Give \$10–20 dollars, decide how to spend, save, and invest.
- Create a vision board of items or experiences they want to invest in to spark motivation.



Teaching children about financial literacy at an early age sets the foundation for responsible decision-making and lifelong success (Saputra & Susanti, 2021). When children learn to earn, save, budget, set goals, and distinguish between needs and wants, they develop skills that promote independence and confidence. By using interactive and engaging activities, caregivers can make learning about money meaningful and enjoyable. Empowering children with these essential financial tools today helps prepare them for a more prosperous tomorrow.

Emotional Outlets



Emotional outlets are important for helping children regulate their feelings and meet their emotional needs in healthy, developmentally-appropriate ways. Giving kids safe ways to cope with anger or frustration, like letting them hit a punching bag or squeeze a stress ball, gives them an outlet to release intense emotions without harming themselves or others. Creative and sensory outlets help kids express emotions they might not have the language for, while movement-based activities help calm the nervous system.

When adults give kids different ways to express their feelings, help them be aware of their feelings, and help them control their behavior, this supports their overall social-emotional development and well-being. Here are some options to encourage a healthy emotional outlet.

- **Physical outlets** (punching a punching bag, stress balls, wall push-ups) help children safely release anger, frustration, and excess energy.
- **Creative outlets** (drawing, coloring, journaling, music) allow children to express emotions they may struggle to verbalize.
- **Sensory activities** (playdough, Kinetic sand, fidgets) support emotional regulation and calming during moments of distress.
- **Verbal outlets** (talking circles, check-ins, role-play) encourage emotional identification and healthy communication.
- **Structured movement** (yoga, stretching, breathing exercises) helps children reconnect with their bodies and reduce emotional escalation.





Brain Wellbeing Matters

Supporting Healthy Minds at School and at Home

Our brains play a vital role in how we think, learn, feel, and connect with others. Just as physical health needs care, understanding, and support, brain and mental well-being do as well, especially in a school community where students, families, and staff work together.

What Is Brain Well-Being?

Brain well-being refers to our emotional, mental, and social health. It affects how we manage stress, focus in class or at work, handle challenges, and build relationships.



Parents and Caregivers Can Help

Parents and caregivers play an important role in supporting children's brain well-being. You can help by:

- Encouraging regular sleep routines and balanced meals
- Checking in about feelings and school experiences
- Creating a safe space for open conversations
- Modeling healthy coping strategies for stress
- Reaching out to school staff when concerns arise

School Staff Can Help

Educators and school staff are essential in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. Supporting brain well-being may include:

- Recognizing signs of stress or emotional fatigue in students
- Encouraging positive coping skills and problem-solving
- Creating predictable, safe, and respectful spaces

Students, Your Role is Most Important!

Your brain helps you learn, feel emotions, and make decisions. Taking care of it is important! You can support your brain by:

- Getting enough sleep and eating healthy foods
- Staying active and taking breaks when needed
- Talking to someone you trust when you feel stressed or overwhelmed
- Practicing calming strategies like deep breathing or mindfulness
- Remembering it's okay to ask for help

When families, staff, and students work together, we create a stronger, healthier school community. Supporting brain well-being helps everyone feel safer, more connected, and more successful.



What's Behind the *Mask*?

-Baylee Gutierrez

Have you noticed that you act and speak a certain way with friends, but do so differently with family? Did you know it's a sign that we all wear masks? I do not mean costumes or makeup, but emotional masks created to protect, hide, or appear a certain way with those around us. Our brains are remarkable that way; it creates way to protect and defend itself with certain people or social situations. It's neither good nor bad; it just is.

Acknowledging that we all wear masks can help us understand people better. An aggressive person may actually feel hurt or scared; a person who is a class clown may find it hard to admit their loneliness, so they joke instead; another person who seems sassy might be hiding a fear of not being good enough; someone who tries to control everything might be managing high anxiety or a fear of losing control. The message: masks can show up in personalities, language, appearance, or attitudes.

Taking a moment to look beyond the mask helps build stronger relationships at home, in school, and at work. When we look past the mask, we can lead with empathy, build trust, and make places where people feel safe enough to be themselves. This is because we all want to feel understood, valued, and accepted.

To learn more about emotional masking, visit [Child and Family Counseling, LCC](#).



Overconsumption is a word we've heard, but what does it actually mean? It means constantly buying, scrolling, or taking in more than we actually need. Over time, we can see the effect it can have on people's mental and emotional well-being. What can that look like?

Stress and Anxiety

In our society, we are pressured to stay up to date on the latest trends, influencers, and that "perfect" lifestyle people portray online. A one-minute video can make us feel like we know someone's whole life, which can increase stress and anxiety. Many people feel pressured to keep up, leading them to feel they are never doing enough or having enough.

Low Self-Esteem

Overconsumption can also lead to low self-esteem. The constant comparison, "I'm not pretty enough, I don't have a nice house, I don't have the new shoes," can make someone feel insecure about their appearance, finances, and life situations. These comparisons are brutal and can negatively affect someone's confidence and self-worth.

Doom Scrolling

Some people use shopping or scrolling as a way to cope with sadness, loneliness, or boredom. Doom scrolling steals joy, time, energy, and often leaves people feeling empty, guilty, or worse afterward.

How Students Can Create Healthier Habits

- Limit screen time: Take breaks from social media and avoid scrolling for hours.
- Think before buying: Ask yourself if you really need something before spending money
- Focus on real life: Spend time with friends and family and pursue hobbies instead of being online all day.
- Practice self-care: Find healthy ways to cope with stress, like journaling, listening to music, or exercising.
- Stop comparing: Remember that social media shows only one-minute videos, and it's not real life.

By recognizing the impact of overconsumption and adopting healthier habits, we can cultivate a more fulfilling and balanced life.

Embracing Gratitude

Cultivating Joy and Kindness in Everyday Life

Gratitude is noticing and appreciating the people, moments, and things that make you smile. When we practice gratitude, we train our brains to focus on the positive. That can make us happier, kinder, and more confident! Studies show that kids and adults who practice gratitude: feel more joyful, sleep better, get along better with loved ones, and feel less stressed. When we pause to be grateful, we discover that every day holds a little bit of magic.

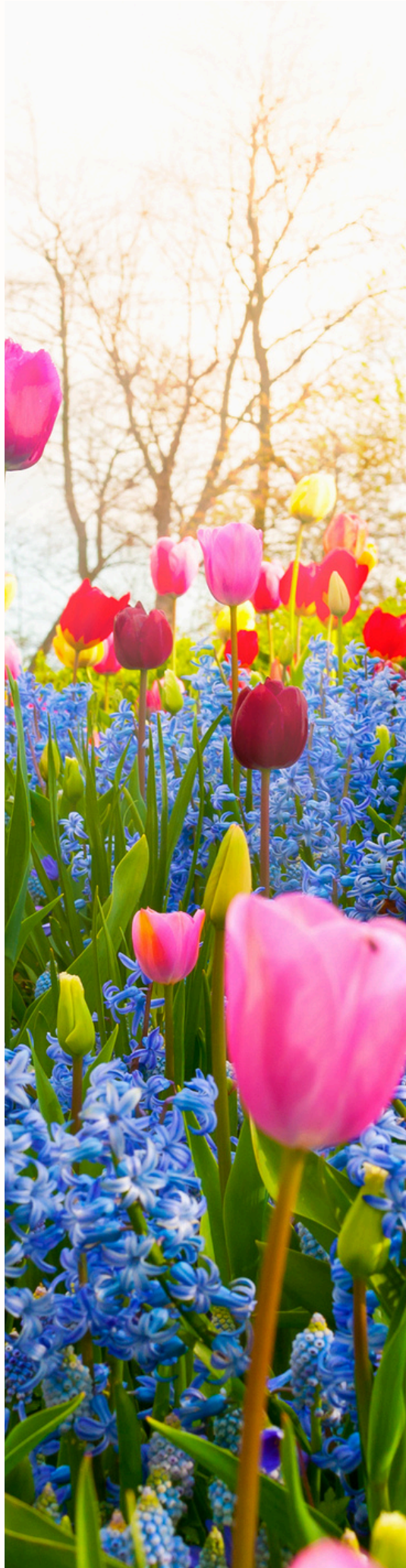
Easy Ways to Practice Gratitude:

- Gratitude Journal: Write down three things you are thankful for each day. Big or small, it all counts!
- Thank You Notes: Write a note or draw a picture for someone who's helped you recently.
- Kind Words Challenge: Say something kind to at least one person every day this week.
- Gratitude Jar: Each time something good happens, write it on a slip of paper and drop it in a jar. Read them at the end of the month!

How can we help others?

Gratitude grows when we share it! Here are some ways we can show thankfulness through helping others:

- Be a Helper: Offer to carry something for a classmate or help a friend who's having a tough day.
- Share a Smile: Smiles are free and can brighten someone's whole day!
- Say "Thank You": Thank your teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, school staff, friends, and family members for what they do.
- Give Back: Donate gently used clothes, books, or toys to families in need.
- Be Kind to the Earth: Pick up litter, recycle, or plant something new in your yard or community.



Want to know what events are happening near you? Gather the family and explore [HERE](#)



Thank You



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