

SEL Warm-Ups: 10 Opening Activities to Build Safety & Connection

Purpose: *Helps teachers integrate quick, meaningful SEL practices into the first 5–10 minutes of class. These warm-ups build trust, boost belonging, and create space for emotional check-ins. This is especially important for students with IEPs, trauma histories, or anxiety about school.*

1. “One Word” Check-In

Ask students: *“What’s one word to describe how you’re feeling today?”*
Write answers on the board or have students share aloud or in journals.

2. Would You Rather?

Pose a light, funny, or thought-provoking question:
“Would you rather have to sing everything you say or always speak in rhymes?”
Encourages play, laughter, and engagement.

3. Emoji Feelings Board

Use printed emojis or a digital slide and have students point to or select how they feel.
You can pair this with: *“Want to share why?”* (optional).

4. “This or That” Visual Slides

Show two images (e.g., beach vs. mountains, pizza vs. tacos) and have students vote.
Can be academic, silly, or themed. Creates comfort and routine.

5. Quick Write Prompt

Example: *“What’s one thing on your mind today that you wish someone understood?”*
Use sentence starters for accessibility. Can be shared aloud or kept private.

6. My Regulation Plan

Ask: *“What helps you feel calm when you’re frustrated?”*
Have students complete a mini menu of strategies (can include visuals, movement, space, etc.)

7. Think-Pair-Share: Small Joys

Prompt: *“What’s something small that made you smile this week?”*

Pairs students to connect over positive emotions and everyday moments.

8. Music Mood Check

Play a short music clip. Ask: *“What does this song remind you of?”* or *“How does it make you feel?”*

Music connects emotionally and builds sensory regulation skills.

9. Calendar of Kindness

Each day, share a simple kindness challenge:

“Hold the door for someone today,” “Say thank you to a peer.”

Encourages social-emotional skills and classroom community.

10. Silent Start

Allow students 2 minutes of quiet at the start of class.

Offer coloring pages, doodle space, or soft music. Especially helpful for students transitioning from chaotic settings.

How to Use These Warm-Ups

- *Choose 1–2 per week and rotate for variety*
- *Use as a bell-ringer or before instruction begins*
- *Adapt for age, setting, or group size*
- *Invite students to lead once the structure feels safe*