

What is social and emotional learning and why should parents and caregivers encourage social and emotional learning?

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) teaches children skills they need to be successful in life. Social and emotional learning is important because it teaches children and adults how to recognize and manage their feelings and get along with others. People who have well developed social and emotional skills have healthy relationships with others and can solve problems by making responsible decisions. They also do better in school and at work. There are five basic social and emotional competencies:

- Making responsible decisions – or making good choices
- Self-awareness or recognizing and managing our emotions
- Social-awareness or developing caring and concern for others
- Managing emotions or establishing positive relationships with others
- Relationship management or handling challenging situations constructively and ethically

This article explains these competencies and sets out the conditions necessary for children to learn how to use these skills.

What is responsible decision making and how can children be taught this skill?

Responsible decision makers consider situations and options carefully before making a choice about what to do. They take into account ethical standards or rules that apply to the specific situation they are facing. They evaluate the safety of the options available to them. They consider what is socially acceptable and have respect for others who will be affected by their decision. Responsible decision makers look ahead to the consequences of various actions and make choices that contribute to their own well being as well as the well being of others in their family, school and community.

Here are three examples of responsible decision making. Elementary school students should be able to identify a range of decisions they make at school. Middle school students should be able to evaluate strategies for resisting peer pressure to engage in unsafe or unethical activities. High-school students should be able to analyze how their current decision-making affects their college and career prospects.

Some ways families and schools can teach and support responsible decision making.

- Give children and youth choices and respect their wishes. Making choices helps children learn how to solve problems. Give them options that are reasonable and acceptable to you. For example, ask, “Would you like cereal or eggs?” rather than “What do you want for breakfast?” Giving children ways to express preferences and make decisions shows that their ideas and feelings matter.
- Ask questions that help children and youth solve problems on their own. Help them find their own solutions. A helpful approach is to ask good questions. Some examples are, “What do you think you can do to get a turn on the bicycle?” and “If you do not finish your homework, what will happen?”

What is self-awareness and how can children be taught this skill?

People who are self-aware can accurately identify their own feelings. They know who they are and what interests them. They know what they value and is important to them. They know their own strengths and have self-confidence.

Here are some examples of self-awareness. Children in the elementary grades should be able to recognize and accurately label simple emotions such as sadness, anger, and happiness. In middle school, students should be able to analyze factors that trigger their stress reactions. Students in high school should be able to analyze how various expressions of emotion affect other people.

Some ways families and schools can teach and support self awareness.

- Ask children and youth how they feel. You can ask a questions like “How do you feel now that you have finished your chores?” or “How did you feel when your friend moved away?”
- Asking children and youth about their feelings gives them the message that feelings matter and you care.

What is social awareness and how can children be taught this skill?

Children and adults who are socially aware can see things from another person’s point of view. They can understand how others are feeling or empathize with them. People who are socially aware recognize and appreciate individual and group similarities and differences. They have respect for others.

Here are some examples of social awareness. Children in elementary school should be able to show they are socially aware by accurately identifying someone else’s feelings. Socially aware elementary schoolers should be able to “read” someone’s expression and tone of voice in combination with what is being said. Children in middle school should be able to predict how others would feel or react in different situations. They might say, “I think my little brother

would be happy if I let him have the bigger cookie.” High school students should be able to reflect on and evaluate their own ability to empathize with others.

Some ways families and schools can teach and support social awareness.

- Express your own emotions and tell children and youth how you feel in different situations. Explain your reactions to what others say and do. Ask students to explain how they think others feel in different situations. Praising children when they accurately identify how others feel and appropriately demonstrate caring for other’s feelings shows them you are socially aware of them and reinforces this skill.
- Demonstrate understanding and respect for the uniqueness and special strengths of different people in your family, class, school or community. Have students share a family tradition with their classmates.
- Avoid saying negative things about people. Coach children to think about other’s feelings when they say negative things about individuals or groups who are different from themselves.
- Discuss the benefits and disadvantages of pre-judging people and situations. Read stories or watch films about prejudice and talk about them with your children.

What does managing emotions mean and how can children be taught this skill?

People who manage their emotions are able to appropriately control their reactions to others and express how they are feeling. They have learned to recognize the things that trigger their own reactions – what “set’s them off.” They have impulse control and can resist “temptations.” They can also manage their own stress and anger. They are able to persist or keep trying when obstacles are in their way.

Here are some examples of managing emotions. Children in elementary school should be able to describe the steps of setting a goal and working towards it. Middle school students should be able to make a plan to achieve a personal or academic goal and carry it through to completion. High school students should be able to make good use of available resources to overcome things that get in the way of achieving their goals. They might, for example, ask for a peer mediator to help resolve a conflict with another student.

Some ways families and schools can teach and support managing emotions.

- Find ways to stay calm when you are angry. Sit down as a family or a class and talk about what everyone can do to stay calm or “keep their cool”. Have your class make a list of the different things they could do to manage their anger. For example, “Take a deep breath and count to 10.”
- Give children and youth a chance to solve problems on their own. Resist the temptation to step in and take over. Ask guiding questions that help children develop the ability to

find solutions on their own. For example, ask "What else do you think you can do in this situation?"

- Apologize to children if what you said or did was not what you meant. Being a good role model shows children and youth how important it is to apologize after hurting someone.

What does having good relationship skills mean and how can children and youth be taught these skills?

People who have good relationships are self-aware and socially aware. They know how to make good decisions in order to cooperate with others. They use their understanding of their own and other's emotions to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts. They make decisions that enable them to help others and resist inappropriate social pressure. People who have good relationships know when they need help and will seek help to solve problems.

Here are some examples of skills used to build good relationships for school aged children and youth. Elementary school children should be able to describe how to make and keep friends. Elementary and middle school students should be able to work cooperatively in a group to complete a project or achieve a goal. Students in high schools should be able to evaluate their own use of communication skills with their peers, teachers, and family members. For example, high school students who get low grades on tests should be able to realize that arguing with the teacher is not likely to be a successful strategy and be able to control their emotions when interacting with teachers. The same students should know the right way to approach the teacher and ask for extra help.

Some ways families and schools can teach and support skills for building and maintaining good relationships.

- Schools can employ strategies that support relationship building such as class meetings and cooperative learning.
- Parents can model good ways to handle frustrating situations and explain what they do to their children.
- Adults can talk with children who are frustrated or upset by misunderstandings with others. Adults can help children understand things from the other person's point of view. Adults can help children figure out how they could handle similar situations better in the future.

What about social and emotional skills for adults?

Children will copy what adults do. Adults who have good social and emotional skills and use them around children and youth are providing a good role model for them to follow. Parents and teachers rely on their social and emotional skills to communicate effectively. Good relationships between parents and teacher support student learning and academic achievement. When children and youth are having problems at school, adults sometimes "take

sides “and react emotionally. Parents and teachers use good social and emotional skills to avoid conflict in such situations. They are aware of and manage their own emotions. They try to see events from all other points of view and evaluate all the possibilities before making decisions. Parents and teachers can learn and practice these skills along with their children and students.

This article was originally written as a series of short articles for the Association for Children’s Mental Health in Lansing, Michigan. It has drawn on the thinking, research, information, and tools of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) promotes the idea that students perform better when academics are combined with social and emotional learning (SEL). According to CASEL, children can learn how to deal with their emotions and relationships with others in healthy ways just as they can learn language or mathematics skills. Readers can learn more about them at www.CASEL.org.