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Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

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INTRODUCTION

Research, observation, experience, and common sense converge to suggest strongly that students' success, which includes but is not limited to academic learning, depends a great deal on students' social–emotional competence. Students who are actively engaged in class and come prepared, who cooperate with their peers, who resolve conflicts peacefully, who complete their work, who attend school often and are not tardy, and who demonstrate initiative and leadership are more likely to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life. Unfortunately, many students lack social–emotional competence. This handout provides recommendations to teachers and schools to help develop essential social and emotional competencies, particularly the five highlighted in the social and emotional learning (SEL) approach (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015):

- *Self-awareness*—the ability to recognize and accurately label one's emotions
- *Self-management of emotions and behavior*—knowing how to control strong emotions, set goals, and organize oneself to effectively accomplishment tasks
- *Relationship skills*—the ability to work well in groups, in both leadership and collaborative teammate roles
- *Social awareness*—the ability to accurately recognize others' feelings and show empathy
- *Responsible decision making at school, at home, and in the community*—the possession of ethically guided problem-solving skills, including goal setting, understanding of consequences for oneself and others, and persistence in the face of obstacles

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

The SEL approach is best known for programs implemented at the school and classroom levels, with ample research supporting its short- and long-term effectiveness in promoting a number of important academic and social–emotional outcomes (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The website for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) presents reviews of multiple SEL programs. Those include popular and research-supported SEL programs such as Responsive Classroom (www.responsiveclassroom.org), Second-Step (www.cfchildren.org/programs/social-emotional-learning/), and Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (ubhc.rutgers.edu/sdm/). The following considerations are to help guide educators in implementing SEL programs (a) at the classroom or school level, with the aim of developing social and emotional competencies among all students, and (b) at the individual student level, with the additional aim of meeting the needs of students who are either at risk for or currently exhibiting behaviors that indicate that social and emotional competencies are lacking.

Classroom and School Levels

The most popular summary of essential features of effective SEL programs at the school level—which also apply at the classroom level—follows a format that is sequenced, active, focused, and explicit, or SAFE (Durlak et al., 2011). As such, SEL programs (a) use active, engaging instruction, including service learning and project-based learning; (b) provide opportunities for skill-building practice; and (c) have multiyear,

developmentally sequenced, nonrepeating lesson structures. Schools with effective SEL programs also actively use data in ongoing ways to monitor how effectively their practices are implemented and how well they are meeting students' needs. In addition, they provide the following important qualities:

- *A common SEL language.* This language is found throughout the school, across subject areas, teachers, and support staff.
- *Flexibility with consistency*. Programs that are too prescriptive and restrictive, as often is the case with commercially produced packaged programs, are likely to be met with teachers' resistance and will eventually wither.
- *Specific lessons focused on SEL.* The school day must have a clear, regular time during which SEL lessons are taught, whether lessons in a packaged program or lessons integrated into the general curriculum.
- *Opportunities to learn and apply SEL across all subjects and throughout the school.* SEL is not only used during a specific lesson or only in school mottos. SEL is the culture of students and school staff that is emphasized in all subject areas and instruction, as well as in school values and codes of student conduct.

In addition to the above features, effective SEL programs require (a) administrative support, as represented by allocations of time, regular monitoring and feedback, and resources for successful instruction; (b) qualified staff who are trained and receive ongoing consultation and other pedagogical support; (c) sufficient time for planning, implementation, and reflection; (d) stable funding that enables teachers and schools to have multiyear curricular plans, as opposed to having to work on a year-to-year and piecemeal basis; and (e) regular communication between the school and families (e.g., newsletters, SEL skills on report cards), and opportunities for families to be involved with the program in a variety of ways that are culturally sensitive, are appropriate, and build on family strengths and values.

Individual Student Level

The above considerations apply to *all* students, including students who lack social and emotional competencies or whose educational or mental health status is at risk due to challenging environmental circumstances or preexisting handicapping conditions. For students who need supplemental SEL, the strategies and interventions typically need to be more individualized, intensive social skills training that is conducted either one-on-one or in small groups. For instance, they are (a) targeted toward specific competencies, such as managing emotions; (b) more responsive to individual factors that contribute to the students' social and emotional difficulties; (c) of greater intensity, breadth, and duration; and (d) implemented not only by the classroom teacher, but also by support staff (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor). Both the teacher and support team would work together with the students' parents or caregivers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended for educators to review and consider implementing in the classroom, with the recognition that some, if not most, are already being implemented. The recommendations are divided into three general categories: general principles, teaching SEL lessons, and responding to challenging behavior.

General Principles

1. ***Be positive and encouraging.*** The most important source of motivation for students is their teachers' confidence. Use praise and rewards strategically and wisely to teach and reinforce SEL skills, and in a manner that does not stifle intrinsic motivation (see *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home*).
2. ***Generate ample opportunities for students to actively participate in learning and to apply and practice SEL skills.*** For example, when teaching SEL lessons, allow students to help one another, such as by using pair-shares, small-group work, and buddying. Other opportunities include service learning, student government, sports and extracurricular activities, and class meetings. Student committees also can help address school problems such as bullying and intimidation; cheating; cyberbullying; gangs; alcohol, tobacco, drug use; and other relevant issues that emerge in schools.
3. ***Build positive relationships with students and among students.*** Having positive school relationships is more important to students' ability to learn than any particular lesson content. These relationships are founded on students' SEL skills, such as listening, emotion regulation,

and empathy. For multiple recommendations for building and maintaining positive relationships, see *Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School* and *Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School.*

4. ***Promote thinking skills and habits of mind that students need for academic success.*** Use techniques for getting students to think about the content the class is learning, as in the following examples:
   - Ask students to give each other clear and specific feedback, and teach them to accept others' observations and defend their own.
   - Challenge students to explain their reasoning.
   - Provide opportunities for reflection, such as after meaningful lessons or completion of units of study.
   - Encourage students to work together to define and solve problems.
5. ***Provide multiple models of social and emotional competence.*** This would involve teachers and other staff not only modeling social and emotional competence, but also discussing examples of SEL competence in the media, in literature and history, by peers, and so forth.
6. ***Promote family–school collaboration.*** Examples include (a) giving parents and caregivers summaries of the SEL skills and virtues that are being covered in class or in the students' small-group practice (samples of which are included in many of the most highly recommended SEL curricula), and (b) encouraging them to apply the SEL principles to their own parenting. SEL skills also might be added to students' report cards to create an ongoing dialogue promoting students' social–emotional competence and character.

Teaching SEL Lessons

7. ***Begin with review and rationale.*** Do not assume that students will remember an earlier lesson or that they will understand why the content is important. Especially where attendance is a concern, begin each lesson by reviewing what happened in the prior lesson and before beginning to teach a new skill or virtue. Asking "Why is this skill or virtue important in your life?" gives students a chance to establish a rationale.
8. ***Emphasize the use of open-ended, problem-solving questions.*** Open-ended questions such as "What happened?" or "What feelings are you having?" help develop students' problem-solving skills and encourage them to take responsibility for solutions. However, open-ended questions often are not productive for younger students and those with cognitive limitations, who respond better to multiple choice questions such as "Did you hit him because he was teasing you *or* because of something else?"

   Two types of questions that are to be avoided are (a) closed-ended questions, such as those that require only a yes or no response (e.g., "Did you hit him?" or "Are you angry?"), and (b) questions that begin with "Why?" The former do not promote critical thinking and self-awareness; the latter are likely to trigger defensiveness (and often students simply don't know why).
9. ***Use the two-question rule.*** This refers to following up a question with another question to help students clarify their own thoughts, feelings, goals, and plans.
10. ***Make frequent use of paraphrasing.*** Paraphrase or summarize students' answers to questions and reflect their thoughts back to them. This helps students feel that they are understood and taken seriously.
11. ***Recognize, and model, use of emotion language.*** Recognizing emotions, particularly complex emotions, is difficult. Be sure to notice and express emotions in yourself and others. For example, you might say, "I notice that you are frowning. I wonder if something is bothering you or if you are feeling sad."
12. ***Provide visual reminders.*** Students have many distractions. If you want them to remember to use a skill, post reminders in classroom and school spaces. For example, many classrooms have a cool-down space where students can go to manage strong emotions. These spaces are good for posting graphic or written reminders that cue students to practice calming strategies. It is wisest to assume that students will remember material from SEL lessons only with prompts to do so from many others around the school building, and to plan accordingly.
13. ***Anticipate times during the day when practice with SEL skills may be needed.*** Certain routines or times of day in the classroom can be more challenging than others. During those times, prompt students to use particular social and emotional skills. For example, having students intentionally engage in self-calming before exams or presentations can reduce anxiety and improve performance.

14. ***Review past and potential use of skills.*** Reviewing the question, "When did you use the skill or virtue since the last lesson or during the past week?" can give students a chance to hear from peers about the situations in which they have applied SEL lessons. Discussing responses is one of the best ways for students to generalize and connect to their experiences. You can ask, "When might you have used the skill or virtue, but didn't?" Students responding to this question can discuss obstacles to using skills, and be encouraged to report honestly to help others apply similar skills.
15. ***Set up contracts.*** The use of contracts in SEL applies particularly at individual and small-group levels but also at the classroom level. Students first identify one or two skills or virtues they are targeting for improvement. They then develop a plan for how to improve and write a contract documenting the plan. The students then arrange to have an SEL buddy or partner cosign the contract and pledge to help their partner work on the target skills, in school and outside school, if possible. This contractual step creates a community of learners that is also valuable for generalizing the lesson outside the classroom.

Responding to Challenging Behavior

16. ***View the situation as an educational opportunity.*** Although use of punitive consequences for a misbehavior may be considered (and should always be fair and judicious), teachers' primary aim should be to prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring. Preventing a recurrence is best done by focusing on (a) what the student might do differently under similar circumstances in the future, which may entail learning new SEL skills or strengthening existing ones; and (b) what teachers and others might do to help the student learn or strengthen SEL skills and to otherwise prevent the misbehavior in the future.
17. ***Try to identify multiple factors associated with the misbehavior that you might target in an intervention.*** A wide range of factors may have contributed to a student's misbehavior, such as a lack of social and emotional skills, whether generally or specific to the situation; the need for changes in the student's environment, including a need for more structure or social supports; peer influences; and so forth. The focus should be on malleable behavioral or environmental factors—ones that might be altered and thus targeted for intervention.
18. ***Address social and emotional deficits that contributed to the misbehavior.*** Interventions to address deficits might include (a) learning, reviewing, or practicing anger management; (b) addressing and disputing negative thoughts that help sustain anxiety or depression; (c) resisting peer pressure; (d) practicing empathy and social perspective taking; (e) accepting responsibility for one's misbehavior; and (f) using social problem-solving steps. The intervention might also include tactfully confronting or challenging thoughts the student uses to support irresponsible behavior, especially denials and excuses (e.g., "Others do it too." "He deserved it." "He started it."). During a disciplinary encounter might not be the best time to address deficits in thinking, depending on the student's emotional state and readiness to explore solutions. In such cases, alternative solutions should be addressed later, when the student is calm and receptive to problem solving.
19. ***Discuss reasons why the behavior is inappropriate other than because of its adverse consequences.*** A primary reason a behavior is considered inappropriate is that the behavior affects others. Emphasize the benefits of alternative prosocial behaviors to the student and others, as well as potential harms done by the inappropriate actions.
20. ***Focus on fixing the immediate problem, emphasizing social and emotional skills the student should demonstrate in the future.*** Fixing the immediate problem might include repairing harm to others, including building a relationship with them. When soliciting solutions from the student, provide guidance such as talking about how the student might fix the problem and think, feel, and act differently in the future. Ask the student to demonstrate SEL skills and give the student positive feedback for demonstrating those skills in appropriate situations, building on the student's strengths and providing encouragement.
21. ***Don't place all of the burden for improvement on the student, and seek help when needed.*** Approaches to preventing a recurrence of inappropriate behaviors might include making changes in the classroom environment and classroom management practices and providing broader support from the student's home and from others in the school. If the misbehavior continues, referring the student for assessment and additional individualized skill-building services would be warranted.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

www.edutopia.org

Edutopia, from the George Lucas Educational Foundation, is an outstanding source of SEL lesson materials, videos, and other resources.

http://www.letitripple.org/character-day/education-hub/

Let It Ripple is an educational resource hub. This link goes to their Character (Every) Day periodic table of character strengths, which provides sets of vetted lessons focused on a wide range of virtues and character attributes.

http://www.casel.org/guide/

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, offers lots of information on SEL, including a comprehensive guide to evidence-based SEL programs from preschool through high school.

Books

Dunkelblau, E. (2009). *Social–emotional and character development: A laminated resource card for teachers, for students, for parents.* Port Chester, NY: National Professional Resources.

This brief, laminated guide is the quickest, most popular, and practical introduction to SEL and related fields, including practical suggestions for classrooms.

Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Gullotta, T. P. (Eds.). (2015). *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This handbook is the most comprehensive collection of chapters on all aspects of SEL—instruction, administration, consultation, research, work with parents, and work with communities.

Elias, M. J., & Arnold, H. A. (Eds.). (2006). *The educator's guide to emotional intelligence and academic achievement: Social–emotional learning in the classroom.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

This excellent collection of sample lessons and lesson ideas is drawn from evidence-based programs from prekindergarten through high school.

Related Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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George Bear, PhD, is a professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware, and recipient of the 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of School Psychologists. His books include *School Discipline and Self-Discipline: A Practical Guide to Promoting Prosocial Student Behavior*; and *Improving School Climate: Practical Strategies to Reduce Behavior Problems and Promote Social and Emotional Learning* (in press).