



Social and Emotional Learning for Middle Schools

Research shows that students who receive instruction in social and emotional learning outperform their peers, get better grades, and develop more positive peer relationships.

👉 **Middle Matters** » June 2008, Vol. 16, No. 5

by Mary Utne O'Brien and Susan Keister

Imagine walking through the main door of a middle school and being greeted by a poster: "Our School Is a Caring Community Where Respect, Responsibility, and Relationships Rule!" The principal greets you and explains that the poster reflects a shared school vision.

As you walk through the halls, you see colorful student-made posters with the words *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, *positive relationships*, and *responsible decision-making* hanging in the halls, with examples of how those behaviors look, sound, and feel.

During the morning announcements, the principal and students remind everyone of the values and behaviors that create a safe and caring learning environment in the school. As you visit classrooms, you discover that teachers and students have created shared agreements about how to treat one another respectfully, and that students are helping each other stick to them.

You step into a language arts classroom where the teacher and students are actively engaged in a collaborative writing activity about what it means to express empathy. In a social studies class, the teacher and students are exploring the skills needed to live in a respectful, responsible, and caring way with people of different cultures. In another class, students are learning about managing anger and resolving conflicts. Students in several science classes are in the process of generating ideas and thinking through possibilities for their service-learning project, which will launch a schoolwide recycling program and beautify the school grounds.

Parent and community volunteers are helping prepare for the upcoming Family Fun Evening. Throughout the school, the atmosphere is positive, creative, and energetic. It's clear that both students and teachers enjoy being there.

Does this scenario sound too good to be true? In fact, it's a reality in hundreds of middle schools throughout the nation that are implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) as the framework for positive youth development and school improvement.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

SEL is the process through which young people and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. These are the skills that allow young people to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices. Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1995, 2006) reports that these skills are more highly correlated with success in school and life than IQ.

Research indicates that these skills not only can be taught, but also can be taught by teachers in schools of every type to students of every background. Research summarized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning clearly shows that students who receive SEL instruction outperform their peers, get better grades, have higher graduation rates, develop more positive peer relationships, and demonstrate caring, empathy, and social engagement. These students also are less likely to use drugs, engage in violent behavior, or become delinquents.

SEL seeks to build the skills of children and youths in five core areas:

Self-Awareness: They are able to recognize their emotions, describe their interests and values, and accurately assess their strengths. They have a well-grounded sense of self-confidence and hope for the future.

Self-Management: They are able to regulate their emotions, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles. They can set and monitor progress toward the achievement of personal and academic goals, and express their emotions appropriately in a wide range of situations.

Social Awareness: They are able to take the perspective of others, empathize with them, and recognize and appreciate individual and group similarities and differences. They are able to seek out and appropriately use family, school, and community resources.

Relationship Skills: They can establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation. They resist inappropriate social pressure, constructively prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek and provide help when needed.

Responsible Decision-Making: They demonstrate responsible decision-making at school, at home, and in the community. In making decisions, they consider ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and the likely consequences of various courses of action. They apply these decision-making skills in academic and social situations, and are motivated to contribute to the well-being of their schools and communities.

Young adolescents are experiencing the most rapid period of growth and development since infancy. At no time is it more important for them to learn the skills of impulse control, emotional management, empathy, interpersonal communication, and responsible problem-solving and decision-making. Goleman (1995) points out that we have a unique opportunity at ages 10 to 14 to have the greatest impact in “rewiring” the brain to stop and think before acting.

Implementing SEL

SEL is most effective when it is part of a schoolwide initiative that:

- Creates a shared SEL vision for the school;
- Establishes norms for appropriate positive behaviors among staff and students;
- Promotes well-managed, safe, caring, cooperative, and participatory learning environments;
- Implements evidence-based, sequential, and ongoing skills instruction for all students; and
- Integrates SEL concepts and skills into every subject and aspect of school life.

Effective instructional methods for teaching SEL skills are active, participatory, and engaging. Here are some examples of ways to integrate SEL into a variety of subject areas:

- Modeling and coaching to help students recognize how they feel or how someone else might be feeling;
- Prompting the use of conflict-resolution skills and using dialogue to guide students through the steps and help them apply skills in new situations;
- Practicing group decision-making and setting classroom rules;
- Using cooperative learning and building teamwork through participation in team sports and games;
- Deepening understanding of a current or historical event by applying a set of questions based on a problem-solving model;
- Participating in cross-age mentoring, in which a younger student is paired with an older one to build self-confidence and a sense of belonging; and
- Teaching reflective listening by having students work in pairs, taking turns describing a situation and repeating what they heard.

What Principals Can Do

As their schools’ primary leaders, principals have a major responsibility for implementing SEL programming. They can provide support by:

- Demonstrating a commitment to schoolwide SEL;
- Developing and articulating a shared vision of students' social, emotional, and academic development;
- Creating opportunities for teachers and support staff to participate in developing an action plan for implementing SEL;
- Assuring that all staff members receive training and support for implementing SEL; and
- Making sufficient resources available.

What Teachers Can Do

In addition to providing instruction in social and emotional skills, teachers' involvement in promoting SEL includes the following:

- Participating on a school team or committee that selects an SEL program and oversees the implementation and evaluation of SEL activities;
- Communicating regularly to inform families about SEL classroom activities and encourage reinforcement of SEL lessons at home;
- Modeling and providing opportunities for students to practice and apply SEL skills in the classroom;
- Using participatory instructional methods that draw on students' experience and engage them in learning; and
- Using SEL skills in teaching academic subjects to enhance students' understanding. For example, in language arts or social studies lessons, students can be encouraged to discuss how characters or historical figures did or did not express understanding of others' feelings or use good problem-solving skills.

What Parents Can Do

Parents can promote their child's SEL by learning more about their school's SEL initiative and modeling behaviors and adopting practices that reinforce SEL skills at home. Examples of such efforts include:

- Participating in family informational meetings;
- Volunteering to assist in their child's classroom;
- Participating with their child in SEL-related homework assignments;
- Giving their child choices, discussing problem-solving strategies, and helping him or her identify pros and cons of alternative solutions; and
- Encouraging their child to share and be helpful to others by participating in community service projects.

Our national commitment to middle-level education means a belief that every young adolescent deserves the opportunity to learn to his or her fullest capacity. To succeed in school, middle-level students need to be engaged, interested, and excited. They need to know how to focus their attention on their work, to keep trying even when they get discouraged or face setbacks, to work effectively with other students and adults, and to be good communicators and problem solvers.

In the past, educators have tended to distinguish between the social and emotional and the academic aspects of learning. However, growing evidence shows that these two kinds of learning are intimately connected. SEL forms a research-based foundation for young adolescents to achieve academic success and to skillfully navigate the most critical time in their growth and development with social and emotional competence.

References

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. New York: Bantam Books.

Mary Utne O'Brien is executive director of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and research professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her e-mail address is muobrien@uic.edu.

Susan Keister is a program and professional development consultant to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Her e-mail address is suekquest@aol.com.