

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

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INTRODUCTION

The world in which we are raising our children is a complicated one. Children, including adolescents, are exposed to great successes and horrible tragedies within the adult world, and yet they also face real daily pressures, such as academic expectations at school, extracurricular activities, and responsibilities at home. They are learning to handle strong emotions, understand social relationships, and make good decisions, all of which are challenging. Many children struggle with these skills, and they experience feelings of loneliness, worry, sadness, and anger.

Adults at home and at school can help children in their social and emotional learning (SEL). The following are five key skill areas youth can develop that prevent or ease their emotional suffering and promote the acquisition of competencies related to managing emotions, practicing social skills, problem-solving conflict, and making good decisions (CASEL, 2017):

Self-awareness—the ability to recognize one’s own feelings, areas of strength and weakness, and likes and dislikes

Self-management—the ability to handle feelings and behave in an adaptive way, set goals, and make plans to reach those goals

Social awareness—the ability to understand others and to show empathy

Relationship skills—the ability to form and maintain relationships with others, particularly in group situations

Responsible decision making—the ability to make healthy and moral choices

Parents and other caregivers are children’s first teachers, and they are essential to helping children

develop healthy social and emotional skills. Parents who create environments that balance support, warmth, and love with structure—by creating high expectations, setting limits, and explaining the reasons behind rules and decisions—have children who are more likely to gain skills associated with social and emotional learning, such as healthy coping, empathy, and problem solving. Within those environments, children learn to deal with emotions by watching and listening and by treating others as they expect to be treated.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING SUPPORTS AND STRATEGIES

Before reading and trying out the tips provided below, first reflect on your own SEL skills:

- **Self-awareness.** How do you experience strong emotions such as joy or anger? What does it feel like in your body? Do you find that you experience certain emotions more often than others? Are there things your children do that trigger strong feelings in you? What do you think about when you have these emotions?
- **Self-management.** How do you handle strong emotions? Do you cope in a way that you want your child to learn? How well do you set goals and make and keep plans to reach those goals?
- **Social awareness.** How much do you notice others’ facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture, and other signs of their feelings? Are you typically accurate about how others are feeling, and do you understand why they may be behaving the way they do?
- **Relationship skills.** How do you connect with others? How do you make friends? Do you

maintain relationships with others over time? Are you more comfortable or effective in a group or one-on-one?

- **Responsible decision making.** What do you think about when you have to make a big decision? Are you able to assert yourself? Do you consider others? How do you solve problems involving conflict or an argument? Are you able to make healthy and good decisions?

Next, consider your child's social and emotional skills. Most of the tips provided in this handout make sense for both young children and adolescents, but you may need to implement them slightly differently depending on your child's age and skill level. Think about what you know about your child in the same areas as above:

- **Self-awareness.** How does your child experience emotions? How well, and with how much variety and nuance, is your child able to name feelings or describe them?
- **Self-management.** How does your child cope with emotions? Is your child able to manage strong emotions appropriately? How well does your child set goals and make and keep plans to reach those goals?
- **Social awareness.** Does your child seem to pay attention to the feelings of others, and are his or her ideas accurate? Is your child able to put himself or herself in others' shoes and show empathy?
- **Relationship skills.** Does your child have appropriate friends? Is your child able to initiate friendships, join games, and resolve conflicts with others? Does your child like to be around others?
- **Responsible decision making.** How does your child make decisions? Does your child think first before acting or act first before thinking? How good is your child at considering consequences, both short and long term, before acting on or after reflecting on his or her actions?

Finally, think about your child's family and school context. How does your family's culture or the school's culture affect your child's key areas of social and emotional learning as described in this handout? What belief systems about social and emotional behavior is your child exposed to? In what ways do you teach your child about social and emotional learning? Is it consistent with what your child is learning at school and in your community?

RECOMMENDATIONS

All parents and caregivers can teach their children social and emotional skills. Recommendations for teaching and modeling the skills described here are organized in three categories: support strategies, structure strategies, and response strategies.

Support strategies are those that will help you to further develop and maintain a positive and understanding relationship with your child across all phases of development. *Structure strategies* are those that will help your child understand limits and boundaries as well as consequences of positive and negative behaviors. *Response strategies* are tips for understanding and responding to your child when he or she is engaging in challenging behavior that would be improved through social and emotional skill development.

Support Strategies

Support strategies can be used to maintain a warm relationship and to help focus on understanding your child's feelings and behavior.

1. **Pay attention to your child in positive ways.** Daily life can be very hectic, and regardless of how difficult your child may have been during the day, try to enjoy some positive time together. This time could be for as little as 5 minutes. Let your child direct that time. Your child might want to play a game, read a favorite story, or even just talk about his or her day. Notice what is being said, and describe it so your child knows you are listening (e.g., "I notice that you picked the red game piece again. Red must be a color you like!"). Devoting undivided attention to children helps them understand that they are important. And by directly engaging with your child, you also are modeling how to have a conversation and how to relate positively with others.
2. **Play with your child.** Play might be one way you build a routine of paying attention to your child. Taking time to play with each other lets you enjoy positive experiences together and have some laughs. Play also can be a great teaching tool. Playing games with children provides excellent opportunities for adults to think aloud and model how to solve problems, make decisions, and handle winning and losing (e.g., "Wow! You got me this time. Maybe I'll win next time. Good game!").

3. **Listen to your child.** Try to notice when your child or adolescent likes to open up and talk to you. It might be during a particular routine, such as when you are in the car together or at bedtime. When parents take a few minutes to pay close attention to what their child wants to share, they show them that they care. It is also an excellent time to help children understand what they are feeling and to help them name their emotions, particularly when they have a hard time describing them. For example, you might say “You seemed both angry and sad when your friends played without you today. That must have been hard for you.”
4. **Help your child to be a problem solver.** When your child is faced with a problem, help him or her work through it, rather than get stuck in a way of thinking that is not helpful. Help your child name the problem specifically and think about whether it is a big problem or a little problem. Help brainstorm ideas for fixing the problem and making good and healthy choices; for example, say “That’s one possibility. What else might you try?”
5. **Praise your child.** Give your child positive feedback when he or she makes good choices, particularly when social and emotional skills are first being learned, such as managing strong emotions and problem-solving with others, or if situations are seldom encountered. Be specific with your feedback and celebrate your child’s ability to relate to others. For example, you might say, “You really were a good friend to Sara when she was feeling sad today. You helped her to feel included when you asked her to join the game.” Or if she was disappointed, say “You must have been really frustrated and disappointed when Marlice got the part you wanted in the play. It was really great that you congratulated her rather than saying something mean or nothing at all. That was really good sportsmanship.”

Structure Strategies

Structure strategies are those that will help you think about how to provide structure within your child’s environment and daily life, how to set effective limits, and how to help your child understand consequences of misbehavior.

6. **Build routines.** Children feel a level of safety when they have daily routines that they can rely on. You

can help by establishing routines for getting up and getting ready for school in the morning, for homework, for mealtimes, for bedtime, and so on. For children at every age, establishing or adjusting a routine is a learning process. You can help by first thinking through the steps of a routine, then teaching the routine to your child. For example, you might teach your child the bedtime routine of going upstairs, brushing teeth, putting on pajamas, picking a story, and getting into bed. For an adolescent, you might build an evening routine that includes leaving electronics downstairs, going upstairs and completing homework, and laying out clothes for tomorrow. Your child may resist routines at first, but almost all children find routines to be comforting.

7. **Set clear expectations for positive behavior.** Setting expectations is important because it teaches children how to act in the world, and it also shows them that you are involved in their lives and are paying attention. Expectations include general ideas that guide behavior, such as “Treat others as you would like to be treated,” or they might be specific to a situation. For example, before going into a store with young children, you probably remind them to keep an indoor voice and stay seated in the cart. For adolescents going out with friends on a Friday night, parents might expect them to communicate where they are going and with whom, and when they will be back.
8. **Use logical consequences for misbehavior.** Children need to understand that certain logical consequences are connected to their behavior. For example, when children use the cell phone inappropriately, it makes sense to take away their privilege of using it for a while, especially if you have discussed that this would happen.

Response Strategies

When your child engages in problem behaviors, response strategies can be used to help you remain calm and to better understand your child’s behavior. These strategies will also help your child learn that problem behaviors are not useful and that regulating emotions and practicing coping are helpful.

9. **What is your child communicating through problem behavior?** Engaging in challenging behavior is a way that children and adolescents attempt to communicate. Is your child seeking

your attention—positive or negative—or indicating that your request is too difficult? Is your child tired, hungry, or anxious? How might your child’s strong emotions be interfering with his or her ability to communicate accurately?

10. **Put yourself in your child’s shoes.** To better understand your child’s behavior, try to imagine yourself in the same situation as your child (or adolescent). What do you think your child is feeling? Try to empathize with your child in different situations.
11. **Redirect.** When engaging in problem behavior, be sure to redirect your child to what is expected of him or her. Consider reminding your child about the expectations for certain behavior that you have talked about. Focus on talking about what to do rather than what not to do. You might say, “Remember, the expectation was that you would be home by 11,” rather than “You were late again”; or “Remember, we share with our siblings.”
12. **Consider natural consequences.** If redirecting your child’s response doesn’t work, consider what the natural consequence would be. For example, if your child is having a hard time sharing with siblings after multiple reminders about sharing, you might take the toy away for a few minutes.
13. **Use planned ignoring or time-out.** If your child is misbehaving to get your attention, you can use planned ignoring or a time-out. Planned ignoring means that you simply stay neutral rather than spend time paying attention to the misbehavior. Time-out is similar and includes remaining calm while directing your child to sit in a time-out spot (or to go to his or her room, particularly for adolescents). Time-out can be effective in removing attention from the child and giving the angry or upset child a chance to cool down and regain self-control.
14. **Help your child persist.** If your child is misbehaving to avoid something unpleasant, such as cleaning up his or her room, then planned ignoring and time-out might not work. In these cases, you might need to think about how to break the task into manageable parts and give positive feedback for completing each part.
15. **Reflect on what happened.** Once your child has calmed down and the socially and emotionally challenging situation has settled down, you should take time to reflect with your child about what happened. It often helps to prompt children to think of their feelings. It also often helps to ask

how they could have coped differently with any strong feelings, and what they might do to redirect their feelings differently if a similar situation comes up again. You can also help your child think about how to fix any damage that was done. Many parents find that the end of the day is a good time to reflect with children on how the whole day went, including both positive and not so positive things. Even adolescents appreciate this reflective time, although their bedtimes might well be later than yours!

16. **Seek support.** When the misbehavior is chronic, or the strategies you are using don’t seem to be working, reach out to others for support. You might contact your child’s school to find out if a certain behavior happens at school and if any intervention strategies have worked there. You might also seek out resources in the community, such as family therapists or parenting support groups. Your pediatrician and the school psychologist or counselor at your child’s school will likely be able to direct you in such cases.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

www.incredibleyears.com

This website from the training series for parents, teachers, and children—The Incredible Years—includes many tips sheets for teaching emotional regulation skills.

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html>

The website of the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning expands on the strategies for parents of young children.

<http://www.parenttoolkit.com/topics/social-and-emotional>

The Parent Toolkit is a website for parents of children, adolescents, and adults that includes resources and tips for encouraging the development of social–emotional competencies across the lifespan.

Books and Pamphlets

Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.).

Positive parenting strategies for the teenage years. A Worklife4You Guide. http://www.wfm.noaa.gov/pdfs/ParentingYourTeen_Handout1.pdf

This handout provides caregivers of teenagers with tips for staying engaged and managing challenging behaviors.

Elias, M. J., Tobias, S. E., & Friedlander, B. S. (1999). *Emotionally intelligent parenting: How to raise a self-disciplined, responsible, socially skilled child*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

This book is a resource for parents helping children to understand emotions and appropriate behavior. It is available as a Kindle book in English and Spanish.

Greene, R. W. (2014). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

This book is for parents and others helping children to problem-solve when they have strong feelings and low tolerance for frustration.

Hankin, V., Elias, M. J., Omer, D., & Raviv, A. (2012). *Talking treasure: Stories to help build emotional intelligence and resilience in young children*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

This book contains 10 stories for caregivers to share with children. It comes with discussion guides that caregivers can use to help their children understand the social and emotional learning aspects of each story.

Related Helping Handouts for Home

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for Home

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

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

REFERENCE

CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). (2017). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sara A. Whitcomb, PhD, is an associate professor of school psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has published a social and emotional learning curriculum, *Merrell's Strong Start*, which includes resources for teachers and caregivers. She has published multiple articles and a book, *Behavioral, Social and Emotional Assessment of Children and Adolescents, 5th Edition*. Dr. Whitcomb continues to work with teachers and parents in school settings to promote positive social and emotional learning efforts for children.

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