

Dear Family:

This is a busy time for children who are learning many new skills in school. They may be reading chapter books, writing stories, using graphs, or starting to play a musical instrument. These are all important skills for children to learn.

Another area of learning that requires specific skills is social-emotional learning. These important skills are often overlooked. This is the realm where children learn how to understand and manage their feelings, how to make friends and be a friend, and how to solve social problems. Learning takes place throughout the day—in the classroom, on the playground, and at home. Children learn by watching and listening to how teachers, family members, and friends interact with one another.

We will be using a curriculum called the *Second Step* program to help us think about, develop, and practice positive social skills. Research tells us that children who learn and use these skills are more likely to get along with others and do better in school.

The *Second Step* program is divided into three units:

- **Unit I: Empathy Training.** Children learn about feelings and ways to show understanding and caring toward others.
- **Unit II: Impulse Control and Problem Solving.** Children learn new ways to solve problems and practice skills such as calming down, apologizing, interrupting politely, and making new friends.
- **Unit III: Anger Management.** Children learn to manage their anger in ways that do not hurt others.

Incorporating photographs and videos of children in everyday situations, *Second Step* lessons introduce and teach all the above skills. All students are given the chance to practice the skills they're learning through role-playing, an important part of *Second Step* lessons.

Families play a crucial role in the success of the *Second Step* program. You will be receiving letters about what your child is learning at school and what you can do at home to help him or her understand and practice the new skills. Please feel free to come and observe one of our *Second Step* lessons, and if you have any questions, be sure to ask. I would be delighted to hear from you.

Sincerely,

Dear Family:

Our class has started learning about empathy. *Empathy* means identifying and understanding your own and others' feelings in order to get along better. Below is a list of skills your child will be learning at school, followed by examples of ways you can help your child remember and improve these skills. Students will be practicing empathy skills by:

- Identifying their own and others' feelings through looking at faces, recognizing body clues, listening to voices, and watching what is happening. (Help your child practice by noticing, "You're smiling," and asking, "Are you happy? Why?")
- Recognizing that people may react differently to different situations. (Help your child practice by saying, "You like to play on the jungle gym, but it scares your friend. What can we do about that?")
- Predicting feelings. (Help your child practice by asking, "How do you think your friend might feel if she asked you a question and you didn't answer?")
- Learning the difference between accidents and things done on purpose. (Help your child practice by asking, "Do you think he meant to knock over your bike?")
- Sharing feelings. (Help your child practice by sharing your own feelings: "I feel happy when you offer to help set the table.")
- Understanding and accepting differences in others. (Help your child practice by saying, "It's okay for your friend to be different from you. You two are alike in some ways too. How?")

In general, simply listening and talking about feelings helps children be more understanding of others. It also helps create a more positive classroom environment.

Please contact me if you have any questions about empathy skills or the *Second Step* program.

Sincerely,

Dear Family:

Our class has started Unit II of the *Second Step* curriculum. It focuses on impulse control and problem solving. *Impulse control* means slowing down and thinking rather than doing the first thing that pops into your head. *Problem solving* is a strategy for dealing with problems we face with other people and as individuals. *Calming-down* techniques are taught to give your child the skills to compose him- or herself so that a given problem can be solved more effectively.

Our class will learn and practice steps for calming down and solving problems. You can help by practicing these new skills at home with your child. For example, reinforcing calming-down skills at home may go something like this:

*Your child comes in upset about her younger sibling playing with her new toy. You might say, "Wow! I can tell that you're upset. Try taking three deep breaths, then count backward slowly before deciding what to do."*

*After your child has calmed down, you might then help her practice the problem-solving steps by saying, "Now that you've calmed down, tell me what the problem is. What are some ideas that might solve it? Let's go through each of your possible solutions and ask: 'Is it safe? How might people feel about it? Is it fair? Will it work?'" Now choose a solution and give it a try. If it works, great! If not, then try something else."*

Copies of the posters *Calming Yourself Down* and *How to Solve Problems* accompany this letter. We use these during our *Second Step* lessons; feel free to post them at home.

*At-home activity idea:* Use the enclosed *Solving Problems* worksheet to solve a problem with your child. Taking on a specific problem (such as remembering to take out the trash) and stating the problem in a nonblaming way will help you reach a solution.

In this unit, your child will also practice using such skills as apologizing, ignoring distractions, and dealing with peer pressure. With some lessons, I will send home the steps for certain skills on a Student Self-Report Homework form so that your child can practice them at home. If your family uses different steps, please discuss this with your child and let me know. We do not consider the steps to be absolute rules; rather, they are guidelines for being safe and fair.

Please contact me if you have any questions about impulse control, problem-solving skills, or the *Second Step* program.

Sincerely,

Dear Family:

Our class has begun the third and final unit of the *Second Step* curriculum. It focuses on anger management. Lessons do not teach that feeling angry is bad. But they do teach that how one acts when angry is critical. The anger-management steps children will learn and practice are designed to help them recognize, understand, and manage their anger. Here is an example of how you might practice these steps with your child at home:

*You hear a shriek from the family room. You find your child near tears because Henry, the family dog, just ran through your child's board game. You say, "Remember to stop and think. Ask yourself how your body feels. I can tell that you're angry. Calm down. Remember what you said to yourself when you needed to calm down the other day? Try saying those things again. Now that you're calm, let's go through the problem-solving steps you learned to see if we can keep Henry from messing up your game the next time."*

A copy of the What to Do When You Are Angry poster used in the classroom accompanies this letter. Feel free to post it at home.

*At-home activity idea:* Write each of the calming-down methods on a small piece of paper. Fold each piece and place all in a container. Present your child with a pretend situation that may cause him to become angry (such as a sibling taking the last cookie). Your child then draws a piece of paper from the container and shows you how to use that particular calming-down method.

With some lessons, I will hand out Student Self-Report Homework to help your child practice at home and allow you to see what we are doing in class. Please contact me if you have any questions about anger-management skills or the *Second Step* program.

Sincerely,

Dear Family:

This week your child has been learning about and practicing goal setting. We discussed how many adults, including famous musicians, athletes, artists, and politicians, set goals. This topic presents a wonderful opportunity to share your own experiences with your child. For example, perhaps in order to get a new job, you had to take a special class and pass a test. Share that experience. Or maybe in order to buy a house, you had to save money and make sacrifices for several years. Explain that to your child.

For goal setting to be a valuable exercise, the goal has to be specific and measurable. In class, your child completed a worksheet on which he or she decided on a goal and broke it down into manageable steps. Have your child share his or her goal and these steps with you. Encourage your child when you see him or her making progress toward the goal. For example, if your child's goal is to "stay calm during recess," acknowledge when your child uses a calming-down strategy at home. Use specific language so your child understands what you are praising. For example, "I saw you taking deep breaths when your brother teased you. You did a good job staying calm." Remember to check in with your child at least once a week to see how he or she is progressing with the goal. It is helpful to emphasize that goals often take time, and sometimes it's even necessary to change goals.

Goal setting is an exercise you may want to do with your child again at a later date. Coach him or her through choosing a specific, measurable goal and breaking it into manageable steps. Please contact me if you have any questions. Thanks again for your support!

Sincerely,

Dear Family:

We have now completed our formal *Second Step* lessons. Be sure to ask your child about the activity we did to wrap up our exploration of social skills.

The *Second Step* program is designed to teach children social skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Although the lessons may have come to an end, the learning and practicing doesn't stop here. There will be many more opportunities for your child to practice the skills introduced in the lessons. In soccer, we practice on a field. In drama, we practice on a stage. With the *Second Step* program, we practice wherever we happen to be at the time. The positive social skills your child has learned can be further developed wherever she or he is interacting with others.

When opportunities arise to use *Second Step* skills, we encourage you to pause and help your child practice. Here are a few examples:

- **Empathy Training.** Your child has a friend over, and the two of them are trying to decide what game to play. Your child wants to toss the Frisbee, and her friend wants to ride bikes. This is a good time to point out that even close friends may have different preferences. Understanding that preferences can and so differ is an important part of being able to relate to one another in a caring way.
- **Impulse Control and Problem Solving.** Your child becomes very excited and wants to dive into a plate of cookies that his sister has set out as a treat for friends. Take this opportunity to coach your child through the calming-down and problem-solving steps. One solution might be that he gets one of the cookies without a major battle breaking out.
- **Anger Management.** Someone spills juice on your child's favorite book. It looks like she is about to lose her temper. This is a time to remind your child about the steps for What to Do When You Are Angry.

These lessons are just a beginning. Keeping *Second Step* skills going by helping your child practice positive social skills will pay off for years to come.

Please contact me anytime you have questions about the *Second Step* program.

Sincerely,