What Is Social-Emotional Learning?

What SEL Is

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is taught in many schools, but it's hard to understand exactly what it is and what it looks like in the classroom.

SEL is:
• Maintaining cooperative relationships
• Making responsible decisions
• Managing strong emotions
• Communicating clearly and assertively
• Solving problems effectively
• Recognizing emotions in oneself and others
• Having empathy for others

What SEL Is Not

Social-emotional learning is becoming part of the public consciousness, but there are some broad (and, in some cases, incorrect) definitions out there.

SEL is not:
• Replacing regular order and discipline
• The school taking on the role of the parent
• Suggesting that today's generation of kids is somehow broken
• Psychotherapy
• Taught at the expense of core academic subjects such as math, science, and literacy

How SEL Is Taught in Classrooms

Children can build social-emotional skills in a variety of ways, including through the behavior they see modeled by the adults in their lives. But social-emotional learning can also be taught explicitly in the classroom, in much the same way math or reading is taught:

• Teachers explain a concept with words, pictures, video, audio, or a combination of these
• Students practice the concept with skill-building, group discussion, individual writing, or partner work
• Teachers continue reinforcing the concept throughout the week
• Teachers send information home for students to work on with their families
• Teachers check in with their students to make sure the concept is understood
• Teachers revisit the concept when necessary

Think of It This Way

When second-grade teachers work with their students to practice reading, no one assumes it's because the students' parents aren't reading with them at home. They may or may not be; the point is, we all agree reading is a skill essential to kids' success and that they need a lot of practice, regardless of the setting.
Why Does Building Social-Emotional Skills Matter?

School Performance

• SEL can predict academic achievement.1 In fact, it's a better predictor of school performance than IQ.2
• Students who participated in an SEL program experienced an 11 percentage point gain in academic achievement.3
• SEL may also help reduce delinquency and other challenging behaviors,4 which can help keep students on track academically.
• Students who have stronger social-emotional skills are more likely to meet educational milestones, such as high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion.5 Schools that employ effective instructional practices and other services to improve students' social-emotional skills can increase the rate at which students earn high school and college degrees.6

Economic Benefit

• The return on investment in social-emotional programming and practices is estimated to be worth roughly $11 for every $1 spent.7

Life and Well-Being

• Supporting young people's SEL has long-lasting effects, including lowering rates of depression and anxiety.8
• SEL is associated with lower rates of risky behaviors, such as drug use and teen pregnancy, and with a decrease in dropout rates of between 5 and 12 percent.9

Career and Workforce Achievement

• Careers that require the mastery of social-emotional skills have outpaced growth in all other occupations—and employers increasingly look for these skills in their employees.10
• 79 percent of employers overwhelmingly identify social-emotional skills as being the most important qualities needed for success—and at the same time, the hardest qualities to find in the labor force.11

References