

10 Ways Parents Can Bring Social-Emotional Learning Home

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Most educators know that supporting students' social and emotional wellness is critical to their overall success. We can't expect students to process information when they're distracted, hungry, tired or feel unsafe.

Now that parents and caregivers are overseeing learning at home, we need to ensure that students continue to build and practice social and emotional skills in meaningful ways, especially when distractions and anxieties from current events and in their personal communities are at an all-time high.

Social emotional learning (SEL) strengthens us as individuals and as communities, especially during uncertain times. When we practice and build our skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building and decision making, we are better equipped to navigate stressors, anxieties, and challenges. We can solve problems and work together to function at a higher level—in the classroom, at work and at home.

Regular practice is key, just as it is for any other skill like reading, math or shooting a basketball. The same ways we exercise our bodies or practice dribbling a ball, we have to practice identifying, expressing and managing our emotions. Empathy is a muscle we have to flex. By consistently doing so, when we encounter stressful situations, we have a toolkit that we can readily draw upon to help us navigate that stressor or de-escalate the conflict.

So how can we practice SEL at home? Here are ten tips that families can follow.

1. Take care of yourself, even when it feels like the last thing you can do right now.

In order to cultivate the social and emotional skills of young people, you must take care of your own mental, social and emotional wellness. Young children are sensitive to the stress of their caretakers.

We must stay calm and realistic. They sense when we are worried and anxious, and our emotions directly affect the emotions of our children. We must build in time, even if only 10 minutes a day, for our own wellness practices—journaling, going for a walk, meditating, exercising, for example. Much like putting on our own oxygen mask first before putting on a child's, we must take care of ourselves during this stressful time so that we're able to show up for others.

2. Establish routines and intentionality.

Routines ground us and provide a sense of safety and security. They are especially important for young children and children who have experienced trauma. Right now, amid the uncertainty of COVID-19, all of us are experiencing trauma. Disasters, forced isolation and other situations associated with the virus break students' usual routines.

Craft a daily routine for you and your children to stick to. Create intentional time and structure for social emotional learning. This would ideally be 5 to 10 minutes of dedicated practice every day. Use an evidence-based curriculum that provides a thoughtful scope and sequence, allowing students to build upon skills over time. At Move This World, we have opened up access to a library of free [videos](#) and [activities](#) to help you integrate this work into your home more easily.

3. Presence is not the same as being present.

Many parents may be more physically present than they ever have because they are now home. But that does not mean they are truly present due to increased work demands while supporting learning at home. Many of us are also stressed ourselves, making us less emotionally available.

It is important to dedicate structured time to connection and not assume that it will happen organically because we are more “present” now than ever before. Be intentional about when you're connecting with children and when you are working. Set daily times for playing together, reading books or singing songs.

4. Commit acts of service or kindness for others.

Practicing kindness for others helps us build an appreciation for our own lives and situations, in addition to improve our physical and mental health. Phone or write people you know who live alone or are on the frontlines to help them feel less isolated. Write a letter outlining the highlights of your day, or draw a picture of a joyful moment you've experienced or something you wish for someone else. Demonstrating kindness gives a more powerful message than just talking about it, and helps build gratitude during difficult times.

5. Engage in creativity together.

Being creative is an inherently vulnerable process, especially for older students and adults. By flexing our creative muscles, we can crack open pieces of ourselves that may otherwise be closed off, find opportunities to learn new things about ourselves and others, or learn new modalities to communicate.

Examples of creativity in action include cooking or baking together, doing puzzles, coloring or art projects, playing board games, or writing a poem or a song together. Moving together is doubly powerful in getting our blood flowing and activating kinesthetic empathy, or the ability to experience empathy through the movement of another human being. Try taking turns mirroring each other's movements or just having a dance party where you each create a new move and teach it to one another.

6. Celebrate what you can.

The days can seem long and hard to separate when they are often spent stuck inside. Try to find something small (or two or three things if you can!) to celebrate each day. Celebrate health, a new day, the sun shining. Journal three daily highlights or share them with each other. Research has indicated that when we stop to "savor the good stuff," we develop resilience to the negative events that may be happening in our lives.

7. Practice active listening.

Do not assume that you know exactly what your child is feeling or is afraid of. Ask questions, listen actively and model eye contact, and then explain what you can in response to their questions. Validate that you see and acknowledge their feelings, fears and concerns.

Research tells us to be careful in how we respond to fear and to be mindful not to redirect or diminish the feeling by saying things like, "there's nothing to be afraid of." By validating our child's emotions we help them better accept and understand their feelings, develop self compassion, and empathize with others.

8. Help your child express and name emotions.

This helps young people understand what it is that they're feeling. If children are struggling to identify their feelings, ask them to express it through drawing, a facial expression, or through a movement in their body. Older students can try journal prompts like: "If I were a weather reporter and my feelings were the weather, it would be _____ today." They may be able to describe a cloudy, gloomy day but not have the emotional vocabulary to specify their feelings.

9. Practice social emotional learning daily.

Building important habits takes practice, and just as you brush your teeth every day, students and adults need daily opportunities to identify, express and manage their emotions. Our emotions and stressors change hour to hour and day to day, and it's important that we check in with ourselves and those around us in order to understand what we all need in order to work through those feelings and move through them together.

10. Transition mindfully.

During times of stress and anxiety, it's easy to get pulled in by negative thoughts and emotions, and it is difficult to remain in the present moment. Transitions are already challenging for young children, so introduce mindful breathing as you transition between learning time, lunch time and play time. This could mean breathing in for a count of 4 and exhaling for a count of 4.

You could also quietly stretch your bodies and follow the leader, de-escalating and bringing down your "emotional temperature" so that we can quiet our bodies and minds and move on to the next thing with more focus. Identifying a color, and asking children to name everything in the room that's of that color, is another quick exercise that helps us focus and takes us away from a swirling stream of worry and confusion.

These are times filled with worry, fear and uncertainty. It is a challenge we didn't expect, and the obstacles are shifting each and every day. We need social and emotional skills more than ever, and we can lean into this event as a learning opportunity in how we react to stressful, overwhelming circumstances while juggling multiple responsibilities.

We will certainly not be perfect each moment of every day. But by opening an honest dialogue about our emotions and incorporating SEL into our days with intentionality, we are helping ourselves and our children now and for the future.