

Social Emotional Learning in Virtual Settings: Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

In mid-March of 2020, schools in the United States shut down in-person learning due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to this unprecedented situation, school education has since shifted to a heavy reliance on various forms of remote learning, and teachers and students have been forced to practice completely new ways of teaching and learning. Virtual learning requires students to draw from a different skill set than what is used in face-to-face settings, such as self-regulation for navigating online learning, or balancing learning and life at home. These new and challenging experiences coincide with limited opportunities for social engagement and an increased potential for isolation. These factors are continuing to contribute to children experiencing high levels of stress as the sense of normalcy is lost from their lives and they are bombarded with new expectations and responsibilities. Children need social and emotional support now more than ever. In this paper, we discuss how integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in daily lessons can benefit children now working in virtual settings, with sample activities organized around cognitive regulation, emotional regulation, and social skills. We address both explicit SEL instruction methodologies and ongoing teaching practices designed to promote SEL.

Keywords:

Social and Emotional Learning, Virtual Settings,
Remote Teaching, SEL Activities

Introduction

In mid-March of 2020, schools in the United States shut down in-person learning due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Since then, schools have been operating using various forms of remote learning. This scale of nation-wide school closure and implementation of virtual learning has never happened before, and everyone involved in school education has been forced to practice completely new ways of teaching and learning without having any training, planning, or preparation time or opportunities. As the superintendent of L.A. schools, Austin Beutner once described in the early phase of the COVID19 crisis, "even in the best of times, launching a comprehensive online learning program ... would be a monumental task, akin to landing on the moon, ... It would take years of careful planning, investment,



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training and engagement with the entire school community. During extended school closures due to the coronavirus, Los Angeles Unified is doing it in a matter of weeks, because students most in need are counting on us.” (Blume, 2020, para. 4). Educators, families, and children are trying their best to navigate this difficult situation. Unfortunately, this challenging time may continue until an effective vaccination for COVID-19 is widely available and distributed.

As this crisis continues, children are experiencing high levels of stress as the sense of normalcy is lost from their lives. Social interaction with their friends are no longer available, and learning from interacting with peers and teachers is restricted. On top of that, children may be worried about getting sick themselves, or they may experience family members becoming ill or dying. Families may also experience financial worries due to the COVID-19 recession. Even after society reopens, the PTSD-like effects may remain within us and children, and children will need social and emotional support more than ever. Social and emotional learning support and instruction is crucial for children to be able to navigate this difficult time.

What is Social and Emotional Learning and Why is it important?

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been defined in various ways by various experts. For instance, Durlak and his colleagues (2011) described SEL competencies including identifying and managing emotions, healthy attitudes toward self and others, positive goal setting, interpersonal problem solving, maintaining positive relationships with others, and making responsible decisions. More recently, Frey and her colleagues (2019) employed integrated a SEL model including five broad categories: identity and agency (e.g., strengths recognition, self-confidence, growth mindset, grit, or resiliency), emotional regulation (e.g., impulse control, delaying gratification, stress management, or coping), cognitive regulation (e.g., metacognition, attention, goal setting, problem solving, or decision making), social skills (e.g., sharing, teamwork, communication, or empathy), and public spirit (e.g., ethical responsibility, civic responsibility, or social justice). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as improving five intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies:

- Self-awareness – The ability to accurately understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- Self-management – The ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.
- Social awareness – The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.

- Relationship skills – The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships by communicating clearly, listening well, and cooperating with diverse individuals and groups.

- Responsible decision-making – The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards and safety concerns across diverse situations (CASEL, 2020).

Based on these SEL definitions, in this paper, we discuss SEL in virtual settings as organized into three domains: cognitive regulation, emotional competencies, and social skills. Cognitive regulation includes metacognition, regulating attention, positive goal setting, problem solving, organizing thoughts and tasks, and responsible decision making. Emotional regulation involves skills such as self-awareness and regulation of one’s own emotions, maintaining positive self-perception, self-esteem, controlling impulse, perseverance, grit, and stress management. Lastly, social skills consist of understanding the perspectives of others, interpersonal problem solving, empathy, and ethical responsibility.

Cognitive regulation, emotional competencies, and social skills are fundamentally intertwined in the learning process, and academic learning can happen most effectively when each one of these three dimensions are well supported (Jones & Kahn, 2017). A rigorous body of evidence has shown that students learn more and have high academic achievement, and classrooms run more effectively when students have cognitive regulation, emotional competencies, and social skills to regulate their emotions, motivation, attention, grit, and the ability to successfully navigate relationships with others and problem solve (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Osher et al., 2017; Sorensen et al., 2016). Social and emotional competencies also affect children’s life beyond their school years. In their longitudinal research, Jones and his colleagues (2015) reported that social and emotional skills of kindergarteners were significantly and uniquely predictive of whether they graduated from high schools on time, completed a college degree, and obtained stable full time employment years later. Social and emotional skills in kindergarteners were also positively correlated with their personal well-being and inversely predictive of involvement in crime and substance use (Jones et al., 2015).

The good news to school professionals is that it is possible for us to teach students social and emotional skills successfully. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal social emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 students in K-12 settings reported that not only could classroom teachers implement SEL programs successfully, but also the most effectively when compared to other school staff and outside

professionals, resulting in significant improvement in academic performance of students (Durlak et al., 2011). This indicates that SEL programs could be integrated into daily educational practices by a classroom teacher and do not require an outside professional in order to deliver it effectively. This study also addressed that school-based SEL improved students' academic performance and SEL skills (e.g., identifying emotions, perspective taking, interpersonal problem solving, goal setting, and decision making) while reducing emotional distress (e.g., depression, stress, or social withdrawal) and conduct problems such as aggression, bullying, school suspensions, and delinquent acts at all grade levels and regardless of geographical location (Durlak et al., 2011).

A more recent meta-analysis of school-based universal SEL interventions addressed its long lasting benefits in the areas of academic achievement, conduct problems, emotional distress, sexual behaviors, and drug use up to 18 years (Taylor et al., 2017). Students who received school-based SEL interventions continued to demonstrate strong social and emotional skills such as positive attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, and social relationship regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, or school location (Taylor et al., 2017). Effective SEL programs and instructions can also lead to safe, caring, well-functioning schools and classrooms characterized by supportive culture and climate, positive relationships, effective classroom management and teaching practices, deeper learning, and reduced behavior problem (Merritt et al., 2012). Quality SEL provides students with a sense of belonging and enhanced motivation through active participation in the learning community (Berman et al., 2018). In such a learning community, students feel valued, respected, and competent, which mediates better academic performance and positive behaviors. School education always has social, emotional, and academic components, and SEL has always been a part of hidden curriculum in education (Frey et al., 2019). Although even supplemental SEL programs are effective to help students develop social emotional skills (Harrington et al., 2001), SEL is not just adding one extra program or standalone lessons once a week. Rather it is how teachers integrate the principles of SEL into the fabric of their teaching practices (Frey et al., 2019). As Frey and her colleagues described, "the ways in which teachers behave, what we say, the values we express, the materials we chose, and the skills we prioritize all influence how the children and youth in our classroom think, see themselves, interact with others, and assert themselves in the world" (Frey et al., 2019, p. 17). Intentional incorporation of effective SEL in daily practices and instruction can make a positive impact on learning community, teacher effectiveness, and children's social, emotional, and cognitive competencies (Berman et al., 2018).

Why is it important to incorporate SEL in virtual classrooms?

As past research from previous disasters such as Hurricane Katrina reported, children who were exposed to a significant event were more likely to experience emotional dysregulation and PTSD symptoms that would lead to reactive aggression (Marsee, 2008), and the reactive aggression behaviors were negatively associated with academic achievement (Scott et al., 2014). During the COVID-19 epidemic, children's families may have been directly affected by the virus or by economic recession. As this unusual way of living has been going on for much longer than we first predicted, children's lives have been destabilized and their regular lives filled with physical interaction with friends and teachers were taken away.

In addition to that, remote learning has forced students to learn in very different conditions than if they were in school. Virtual learning demands students to practice a different skill set such as self-regulation to navigate online learning, balancing learning and caring for self and siblings, sharing physical space with family during the class, limited opportunities for social engagement, and increased potential for isolation (Education Elements, n.d.). Children need social and emotional support now more than ever in order for them to be able to learn. In this paper, we discuss how to integrate SEL in daily lessons in virtual settings, and resources that can help school professionals to effectively implement SEL.

Teaching activities to support SEL in virtual settings

Evidence-based SEL programs use one or more of the following approaches: explicit instruction via free-standing lessons, general teaching practices, integration of SEL within the context of an academic curriculum, and organizational strategies to create a climate and culture that promote SEL (CASEL, 2020). In this paper, we provide sample activities to support student social and emotional learning organized around cognitive regulation, emotional regulation, and social skills using two types of approaches: (a) explicit SEL instruction and (b) ongoing teaching practices that are designed to promote SEL.

Cognitive Regulation

Explicit SEL instruction ideas

- Provide strategy instructions on using a planner and organizing schedules to monitor online school work. If applicable, introduce online tool such as Trello, Google Calendar, or toggl, which would allow students to share to-do lists with their peers and teachers. Model how to use the tool with step-by-step instruction, including what kind of tasks need to be listed and monitored using screen sharing

during the online lesson. Provide students multiple opportunities to practice during the lesson. Educators should provide feedback on how students utilization of the tool as often as needed. This will help students to practice planning, task organization, goal setting, and decision-making skills with guidance toward improvement and efficiency in these areas.

- Get problem scenarios from students, which could be something they are currently experiencing or experienced before, or use topics related to current social issues. Share the scenario with the whole class and identify steps to solve the problem together. Ask students to recognize a goal first, then ask them to type their suggestions for each step in a chat box or verbally share their thoughts one by one. Teachers can also use a collaborative board on Nearpod to develop solutions together. For younger students, a teacher can provide multiple options for each step and ask students to select a better solution using an online poll tool or Kahoot! type platform.

- Share a video about growth mindset. For young children, use a fun video like "Sesame Street's with Bruno Mars," or for older students, "What is growth mindset" by Carol Dweck, to help them grasp the concept of a growth mindset. Educators can also share websites related to brain plasticity and have a discussion about specific strategies on how they can maintain growth mindsets. For younger students, picture books like "Giraffes can't dance" by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, or "The most magnificent thing" by Ashley Spires would be a good medium to facilitate discussion. You could also create a Word Cloud composing words related to growth mindset using free online word cloud generators (e.g., WordArt.com, JasonDavis.com, or Polleverywhere) as a class and post the result on a class site.

- Use literature that shares non-fictional stories about how people persevered through hard time to turn their lives around and reach a goal (CASEL, 2017). Reflect and discuss what the barriers they encountered and how they overcame them, what resources they used, or who was able to help them.

General SEL practice ideas

- Use daily affirmations to build students' self-confidence and practice positive self-talk. Students or teacher can choose an affirmation statement of the month or the week. Let older students type their affirmation statement in a chat box or a collaborative board on Nearpod, and have the class vote for the statement of the month using the online survey tool. A teacher can introduce a book such as "I'm gonna push through!" by Jasmyin Wright to develop their class slogan together for younger students.

- Introduce self-monitoring strategies to practice self-awareness and self-regulation during virtual lessons. Put some visual cue on the screen at a certain interval when students check if they were paying attention or actively engaged (e.g., taking notes or listening to the speaker) at that moment. Ask students to put the monitoring tool in front of the camera at the end of the class, or screenshot their sheet to submit. When introducing the self-monitoring strategy, model how to use the tool and

practice using it several times. Provide feedback on how accurately they were monitoring their own behavior, not how well they were paying attention or engaging. Online apps such as I-Connect can be introduced, if applicable.

- Monitoring progress also help students to check where they are in a relation to the lesson objectives and come up with a plan to accomplish their goals. Use online survey tools or a chat box to check where they are and what they need more practice or explanations for. A video tool such as Flipgrid can let students record themselves to reflect on their own progress and allow peers to provide feedback to each other.

Emotional Regulation

Explicit SEL instruction ideas

- Share stress-reduction strategies such as breathing techniques, yoga, relaxation exercises with music, or mindfulness practice. Practice the strategies during a virtual lesson and allow students to reflect on their emotions.

- Use the same problem scenarios from cognitive regulation activity, identify feelings they might have if they were in the situation. Either provide or have students generate age-appropriate vocabulary words to express their feelings. Brain storm what they can do to improve the way they feel in the situation (e.g., "hug my mother," "talk to my dog," or "take a walk"). This helps students to practice empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation skills.

General SEL practice ideas

- Connect with your students via check-ins. Positive teacher-student relationships are associated with higher academic achievement (Curby et al., 2009), better emotional self-regulation (Merritt et al., 2012), and reduced behavior problems (Demantet & Houtte, 2012). Use check-in questions before starting the virtual class to connect with your students. Ask students to pick a particular emoji that represents their emotion and post it in a chat box, or students can simply draw a picture of an emoji face to show their emotion on the screen. For older students, allow them to pick a GIF or a song instead of an emoji. Use a quick survey tool on Zoom, Polleverywhere, or survey function on Nearpod to check their feelings. When a teacher realizes any student has troubling feelings, take the time to listen to them and acknowledge their troubles. If it seems helpful, meet with the student privately in a separate online session. Connect the student with necessary resources such as a school counselor.

- Create age-appropriate class jobs and responsibilities for students during online lessons or on virtual learning platforms that enhance their sense of ownership and responsibilities. It can be a small task such as being a time keeper, a chant leader, or a discussion facilitator. This enhance students' sense of self-worth, efficacy, and competence, which can be a basis of their motivation to work on challenging tasks (Souers & Hall, 2019).

- “Tell students routinely why you the teacher feel happy/optimistic for them and their future” (CASEL, 2017, p. 5). This type of message helps students to shape positive self-perception and to stay resilient and persevere during difficult times.

Social Skills

Explicit SEL instruction ideas

- Play the “Hey, me too!” game. A teacher or a game facilitator of the day (another class job idea!) selects a topic such as “my favorite ice cream flavor”, and asks each student to provide their answers. When other students hear an answer that is the same as theirs, they make “Me too” hand signal using American Sign Language. Students can visually see the connections with their peers and can be able to feel a sense of community.
- Use online learning tools for explicit SEL instruction such as Everyday Speech. It is a SEL platform with interactive videos and activities for students to learn important SEL skills.

General SEL practice ideas

- Provide opportunities for project-based learning related to real world problems. Help students identify their own project based on the needs they see in their home or community. It can be a small project such as writing a note of kindness to every family member or their neighbors. Students will practice empathy and ethical responsibility through the project.
- Use collaborative learning opportunities as much as possible such as using a breakout room function or providing asynchronous collaborative project opportunities. Students get to practice communication and interpersonal problem solving skills. When using a breakout room during the virtual class, make each group small and assign each student to a role such as a facilitator, secretary, or reporter.
- Practice virtual applause. When someone contributed to the discussion or made a good comment or asked a good question, encourage the entire class to give the student a virtual applause using actual hands or using hand clapping icons.

Share a note of kindness secret admirer style. Randomly preassigned paired classmates write a brief note of kindness telling him or her all of the things that they like about them, or write something that cheers them up. Once they submit the note, a teacher provides it to the receiver. Who wrote the note should remain secret.

Conclusion

Finally, it is important to emphasize that effective social and emotional learning for students starts with teachers (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers and school professionals are not immune to the effects of this COVID-19 crisis, yet they are asked to provide

their students with a sense of stability while there is no stability in their own daily lives. Supporting teachers and school professionals with their social and emotional well-being should be a priority of school leaders. Effective support cannot be provided in one-time workshops, but through ongoing dialogue and interaction with colleagues and coaches (Berman et al., 2018). School leaders should provide teachers and professionals opportunities to have rich conversations about instructional resources, lesson design, and the handling of challenging situations, as well as a little time for them to have usual chitchat before meetings begin. When teachers manage their social and emotional demand and well-being, the quality of teacher-student relationships is boosted and their effectiveness in classroom management increase, resulting in children feeling comfortable in the learning community and learn more deeply (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

We are all in an unprecedented situation together. Even for adults, it is hard to regulate our emotions, cognition, and social competencies in this new world full of uncertainty and a lack of social interaction. On top of that, remote teaching and learning has also forced educational professionals and students to practice many new social and emotional skills they never used before. Consider how unnatural it is for children to interact with peers who are all facing at them on a computer screen, but not necessarily talking or listening to them for hours. It is imperative to provide children the SEL support and instruction necessary to help them get through this difficult time. Additionally, the strategies shared in this paper could be implemented in in-person classrooms after this remote learning days are over. Even after society reopens, the PTSD-like effects may remain within us and children, and the benefits of SEL will continue to benefit both teachers and students. Ongoing SEL support and instruction is the key to our continued persistence and perseverance during this crisis, and so our execution of SEL programs must be well thought out and grounded in research.

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