Submission Date	June 1st, 2022
Status (Draft, Ready for Review, Approved, Published)	Approved RT 6/3/22
Author	Bibi Sabahat Shah
Topic	*The Basics of Social-Emotional Learning*
Tier & Word Count (A: 2500, B: 1000, C: 500)	Tier A 2392 Words
Primary CASEL Category	N/A - this blog is an overview of all CASEL categories
Primary Keyword	Social-emotional learning
Secondary Keywords	Life Skills, Emotion Regulation, Emotional Intelligence, Social Skills
Social Media Blurb	Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a popular term, but what does it mean? A child psychologist breaks down the basics and information that every parent should know.
Link to voice-over (For Tier A)	

The Basics of Social-Emotional Learning

Bibi Sabahat Shah, Ph.D.

Like many parents across the country, I waved goodbye to my children with a slight lump in my throat on the first day of school. My thoughts that day were not about what they'd learn or their reading level but who they'd play with and whether they'd make any friends. Would they sit with the child who was alone at lunchtime? Would they be able to handle the routines and demands of a classroom? And how would they express their feelings if they felt upset or frustrated? Moreover, I wanted them to be happy, social, and kind members of their class.

As parents and caregivers of young children, we all want the same thing: We want to raise happy, healthy, successful, and empathic children who will become the next generation of good humans that contribute back to society. Children are not only our future but the common denominator across the world as we look to raise the next

generation. Are we doing enough to ensure that the next generation of world leaders, scientists, and writers will be ethical, compassionate, and peaceful? If we look at recent trends, we see a rise in childhood anxiety, bullying, school violence, and family conflict. Now, more than ever, the need is great to foster and nurture valuable social and emotional life skills in children to combat these problems.

What if I told you that families, schools, and communities could all work together to prevent these concerns using an evidence-based framework that helps children learn important social-emotional and life skills? For over two decades, psychologists have been taking a closer look at what makes children happy and successful. They've found that alongside academics, there has been a lack of a concerted effort to teach important life skills. In other words, children can learn to read, write and master academics, but unless they are able to get along with their peers and manage their emotions and behavior, they will not be successful members of their community.

Now imagine a world where children were taught empathy, relationship skills, conflict resolution, and emotion regulation. The result would be a new generation of children who developed a deep sense of connection with others and made the world a kinder, more wonderful place. The good news is that we can do this. And we have been doing this with success. Research shows us that Social-Emotional Learning or SEL can be taught and nurtured both in schools and at home to help children manage their emotions and behavior leading to a positive school and home environment.

What is Social-Emotional Learning?

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, is the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, relationship, and decision-making skills that are important for success in school, the community, and beyond. Research has shown that the development of

these skills is a better indicator of success than intelligence or IQ. This is because children with strong social-emotional skills are better able to navigate everyday challenges, manage their feelings, and thrive both academically and socially. Honing in on key skills such as emotion regulation, relationship skills, self-discipline as well as perspective-taking, SEL provides the foundation for raising children who are well-balanced, empathic, and successful. Children don't just survive. They thrive. Schools benefit and most importantly, society benefits as a whole. - all due to SEL.

A study conducted by the University of British Columbia, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University shows that SEL's benefits continue to help students beyond the classroom for many years to come. The study looked at more than 97,000 students from kindergarten to middle school in the US and UK. Results not only confirmed that Social and Emotional Learning continued to have positive effects in the classroom, but was also linked to longer-term benefits such as overall well-being. What's more, SEL programs have been shown to reduce bullying in schools by increasing communication and relationship skills in children, as well as empathy.

Let's break down social-emotional learning into what it means in real-life situations. SEL can be a daunting term, but what it really means is social and life skills to help us succeed in school, work and relationships. One framework for SEL, from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), organizes important SEL skills into five types of life skills:

- **Self-awareness:** Being able to identify our own emotions as well as our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Eventually, a child can learn that these are all connected. Self-awareness also includes learning about our own strengths/limitations and emerging with a growth mindset where we can build optimism and resilience and an "I can do this even if it's hard" attitude.

- **Self-management**: This involves managing our emotions and impulses, as well as helping children delay gratification. As many a parent can attest to, young children are born with natural curiosity and impulsivity. While this is a good thing when they are playing and exploring, it can be problematic in a learning environment. Through early childhood, self-management skills can be taught both at home and at school.

- **Social-awareness**: Social awareness involves understanding others' feelings and perspectives and having empathy for others. This is very important in a world where we live with others from different cultures and backgrounds. Young children are egocentric (they view the world from their own viewpoint). From the age of three until six or seven, children are developing their perspective-taking skills (understanding that others have different viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings). These skills are crucial for developing friendships, getting along with others, and respecting those who are different from us.

- **Relationship Skills**: This includes communication, making friends, navigating social pressure, and negotiating conflict. This is at the core of who we are as inherently social beings. Being able to communicate effectively is a skill that can be taught and nurtured throughout childhood. It lays the groundwork for how we will deal with conflict, peer pressure, and (later on) how we get along with our coworkers.

- **Responsible Decision Making:** This is the ability to make good choices about behavior and social interactions. Children face many situations, both at home and school that require them to make choices about their behavior. Peer conflict at school and sibling rivalry are some examples.

Now let's take a closer look at what these critical social-emotional skills mean in real life. The following are all situations where these skills play an important role.

- **Making friends.** Children who are aware of their own feelings, as well as the feelings of others, are better able to make and maintain friendships. Empathy and perspective-taking are the foundation for meaningful life-long relationships.

- **Success at school:** To be able to do well at school, a child needs to know how to get along with others, pay attention and manage their emotions. These are all sub-skills of social-emotional learning.

- **Bullying and Peer Pressure:** Children who are able to handle conflict and possess empathy are less likely to bully others and are better able to handle a bullying situation. They are also able to navigate and stand up to peer pressure.

- **Parenting and Family routines.** Parents who foster social-emotional skills by acknowledging their child's feelings, and helping them manage those feelings, have balanced and healthy family routines. They are able to set healthy boundaries and practice respectful and authoritative parenting (warm and nurturing but firm).

- **Navigating conflict** Conflict is an inevitable part of life and learning how to handle disagreements and conflicts is an essential life skill that is a part of social and emotional learning. Studies have shown that teaching conflict resolution to children leads to safer and more effective learning environments.

- **Becoming a caring and responsible member of the community**
  When SEL and its components such as empathy, respect for others, and responsible decision-making are taught at a young age, children are able to internalize these values and become caring and responsible members of the

community. In other words, there are moral implications for SEL. Parents contribute to this alongside schools by adopting an authoritative and respectful parenting style.

Children's skills in these aforementioned areas grow throughout childhood. Research shows that when children engage in activities that foster these social and life skills, improvement is shown in these as well as in brain structure and function. Let's now take a closer look at the brain science behind SEL.

The Neuroscience Behind SEL

The human brain is truly remarkable. The feature of the brain that makes it so is its *plasticity* - or its ability to grow, mold, and develop neural networks in response to stimulation.

In the last 15 years, neuroscientists have made great progress in learning how the brain develops and how that development is related to the external environment in which we live. Enriched environments versus deprived environments show striking differences in brain and learning outcomes. Perhaps the most fascinating insight has been that human brain development requires social relationships and emotional experiences to thrive. The quality of these social experiences also matters. An enriched environment full of warmth, positive interactions, and stimulation is important.

The latest neuroscience research shows that brain networks are activated by social interactions. In other words, when we help a child manage their emotions, the brain development is affected which in turn lays the pathways of neurons to help a child learn that skill. When we give children the appropriate support and encouragement, they naturally develop the patterns of thoughts and feelings that support growth and intelligence.

While a child's brain grows in neural connections at an amazing rate, it cannot happen without a parent or caregiver providing the social experiences. Children are not born knowing how to manage their emotions, impulses, or behavior. These skills can be taught both by caregivers as well as educators.

One type of brain cell, or neuron, the mirror neuron plays a huge role in how we learn through observing a parent or caregiver. Mirror neurons' amazing feat: They can respond and fire not only when we engage in an action but also when we observe someone else. For example, if we are walking in the park and see someone fall, we immediately feel their pain and empathize. We watch a movie and can "feel" how the characters are feeling. Do you yawn when someone else does? These are all mirror neurons at work.

Mirror neurons were first discovered in the early 1990s, by a team of Italian scientists who found that neurons in the brains of monkeys fired both when the monkeys grabbed an object and also when the monkeys watched another monkey do the same. The mirror neurons explain how and why we "read" other people's minds and feel empathy for them. Although more complex in humans, we also have a "mirror" system where we learn by observing closely how our caregivers or parents respond to us.

In social-emotional learning, particularly emotion regulation, this translates into how our parents or caregivers help us regulate our emotions by a process known as co-regulation. Young children do not have the sophisticated frontal cortex to understand and process emotions. A parent steps in and acts almost as a second brain by helping the child label and process the emotion. Mirror neurons are firing away!

How can Parents Foster Social-Emotional Learning

Manage our own emotions

Being a parent or caregiver to young children can be oftentimes overwhelming. At times we can let our emotions get the best of us. After all, we are only human. It is important for us to learn to manage our emotions before we can expect our children to do the same. We know that children learn more by observation (remember those mirror neurons?) than through any other way. Modeling how we process our emotions can help them learn how to do the same.

Adopt a parenting style that supports social-emotional learning

As parents, we all have slightly different styles of parenting. Psychologists who study parenting have put forth four parenting styles based on how much control or authority a parent exerts as well as warmth. The parenting styles are Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive, and Neglectful. Research has shown that the authoritative style of parenting where parents are firm but warm (exert control but in a warm and nurturing way) is the best in terms of outcomes for children. Children of authoritative parents are more successful, competent, and social. Authoritative parents take the time to discuss situations with their children and to use *inductive discipline*, where they explain through reasoning and by discussing values and goals as well as how others feel. This type of discipline promotes empathy and perspective-taking.

Connection through family routines

Meaningful and predictable routines are important for children. They help children understand what comes next and how to prepare for it. Children in homes with predictable routines (in contrast to chaotic home environments) are less anxious and more responsible and independent. As parents, we might feel we need to continuously look for or create opportunities for connection. But in reality, everyday routines can be a moment to connect. Setting the table for dinner, reading before bedtime, or making pancakes on Sunday morning are all moments to connect with

our children where we can talk, share, laugh, and most importantly, be fully present with our children.

Reading with your child

How we read to our children is just as important as how often we read to them. *Dialogic reading*, or reading a story to a child where the child is able to narrate or talk about the story is a reading technique that has been shown to improve social-emotional learning as well as comprehension and vocabulary. In contrast to traditional reading techniques where the adult reads and the child listens, this technique actively involves the child with questions and prompts to narrate or tell the story. Colorful and interesting pictures are a big help! To put it simply, dialogic reading is having a conversation with your child about a book. While reading any book that interests your child is great, reading a book on topics related to social-emotional learning will help your child develop those skills. Some important topics include making friends, anger management, worries and fears, and kindness.

Getting support

Parenting is hard. It's important to remember to be kind to ourselves as parents and to remember that we are learning every day. It's also important to look for support and resources to help us become caring and confident parents.

References

Blair, C., & Raver, C. C. (2015). School readiness and self-regulation: A developmental psychobiological approach. Annual Review of Psychology, 66(1), 711–731.

Getting started with managing classroom conflict: Center for teaching innovation. Getting Started with Managing Classroom Conflict | Center for Teaching Innovation. Retrieved May 25, 2022, from https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/getting-started-managing-classroom-conflict.

Hess, F., Bio, F. H. A., & Bio, A. (2020, July 30). The moral implications of social and emotional learning. Education Next. Retrieved June 1, 2022, from https://www.educationnext.org/moral-implications-social-emotional-learning/

Immordino-Yang, M. H., Darling-Hammond, L., & Krone, C. R. (2019). Nurturing nature: How brain development is inherently social and emotional, and what this means for education. Educational Psychologist, 54(3), 185–204.

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. Child Development, 88(4), 1156–1171.

The brain basis for social-emotional learning also supports academic learning. UNESCO MGIEP. (n.d.). Retrieved May 24, 2022, from

https://mgiep.unesco.org/article/the-brain-basis-for-social-emotional-learning-also-supports-academic-learning