



Why Emotional Intelligence Matters

Teaching emotional skills is making a big comeback. The five areas that should be part of your curriculum.

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When you enter PS 32 in the Belmont section of the Bronx, it's easy to see that emotions—and how students handle them—are as big a part of the curriculum in this school as math or reading. The walls are covered with colorful construction paper displays that highlight essays like “The Things I Love” and “What Makes Me Scream.” In Melissa Locasto's kindergarten class, her 18 students sit on the rug while the teacher selects familiar puppets from a wicker basket for an end-of-the-year lesson. “What has Mr. Snail taught us?” she asks, holding up a soft puppet with a bright red-felt shell.

“How to come out of my shell when I'm feeling shy,” volunteers a quiet boy in the front. Locasto smiles, encouraging him.

“He's taught us that when we are afraid and embarrassed, or feeling shy, we sometimes go into our shell. But that's the time when we might need to take deep breaths to calm ourselves. Or to ask someone for help,” she says, filling in. The little boy nods, enthusiastically.

“And what about Mr. Grasshopper?” she asks.

Another little boy shouts, “How to pay attention when your body wants to—” Then he jostles other kids to demonstrate a world-class case of the fidgets.

Make no mistake. PS 32's principal, Esther Schwartz, like nearly every other public school principal in the nation, has a laser-like focus on improving test scores. But in the last five years, she's concluded that her 800 students need more than skills and drills. Nearly all come from very poor, stressed, and sometimes chaotic families. “Before they can begin to learn, our children often need help with basic social skills—sharing or taking a turn. Many need help regulating their attention, their emotions, or controlling their impulses,” says Schwartz. Faced with dozens of disruptive children, Schwartz turned to an innovative group called Turnaround for Children, which helps failing schools improve their outcomes through emotional education.

Turnaround for Children helps administrators identify troubled kids, then works with

teachers to build academically rigorous and emotionally healthy learning communities by making social and emotional skill-building part of the comprehensive curriculum. “We’ve discovered that social and emotional skill-building goes hand in hand with learning,” says Schwartz. In the five years that Turnaround has been at PS 32, the number of disciplinary problems has plummeted and the percentage of kids deemed proficient in reading has risen from 30 to 72 percent.

Everything Old Is New Again

In an era when high-stakes test scores rule, talking about social and emotional development in children can seem old-fashioned. But lately, the conversation about the so-called soft skills—the personal and interpersonal abilities kids need to maintain mental health and thrive socially, emotionally, and intellectually in a classroom—is being heard again around the nation. In 2004, Illinois adopted a roster of social and emotional goals teachers are expected to cover right along with mathematics and language arts. This year, New York state is expected to do the same. Schools in Singapore, which produce some of the highest-scoring mathematics students in the world, have made social and emotional learning a key component of their education formula.

Why did we stop talking about the social and emotional development of children? Blame the self-esteem movement of the 1980s. Back then, many administrators and teachers believed that classroom experiences should be structured around building a child’s sense of self-worth, even at the expense of achievement. Posters announcing “Everyone Is Special” and advising children to “Learn to love yourself” could be found in almost every school. The programs were a success—sort of. Kids felt satisfied even when they failed and their opportunities for higher education withered. Eight years ago, when No Child Left Behind became law, measurable standards came into vogue and feel-good programs disappeared, taking with them the idea of emotional development in the classroom.

These days, academics, education researchers, principals, and teachers are discovering—or maybe rediscovering—that reading and math alone may not be enough. “We know that the emotional piece is really very important in terms of a child’s overall well-being and capacity to learn and grow,” says Dr. Jerlean Daniel, deputy director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and chair of the Psychology in Education department at the University of Pittsburgh. But just what, exactly, is that emotional piece?

Researchers have begun to identify the soft skills that kids need to succeed. Here are the five most important, with some tips on what you can do in the classroom to help foster the growth of these skills.



1. Naming Those Feelings:

The ability to name feelings, understand them, and express them in a socially acceptable way is essential to a child's success. Most parents, caregivers, and, later, preschool and elementary school teachers provide this kind of instruction almost reflexively. If a toddler cries when a toy is taken away, his mother or teacher may ask, "Are you upset because you want that toy?" This soothes and provides a lexicon for the highly charged moment. With kids from a deprived background or with older children, the job of helping a child sort and articulate shades of emotion becomes part of a teacher's job.

Pam Cantor, a child psychologist and chief of Turnaround for Children, says the simple, puppet-based program featuring Mr. Snail and Mr. Grasshopper developed by her staff and taught once a week can help kids name what they're feeling so they can fend off tantrums and meltdowns. If you aren't able to use such a program in your school, you can opt for a less formal approach involving classroom discussion. If a child refuses to speak during circle time out of shyness, for example, you might say, "That's okay, Andre. Sometimes I don't feel like talking, either. But if you want to share your ideas later, we'd love to hear them." Then talk to the child individually about ways to calm his anxiety, such as by taking deep breaths. Finally, you might host a whole-class discussion about how to overcome shyness.

2. Building Trusting Relationship:

In his now-classic study, former Stanford University professor and current Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching president Anthony Bryk found that trust is the emollient that keeps schools running smoothly. And nowhere is that element more important than in the classroom—particularly in the relationship between teacher and student. When teachers take the time to establish trusting relationships with their students, it can make a world of difference. "It makes learning more powerful," says Mary Utne O'Brien, a professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a researcher for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. "Many teachers bemoan the fact that they don't feel like they have time to develop those relationships. I would argue that building trust is the first lesson before any others." Small gestures mean a lot, says O'Brien.

She suggests that you be predictable, be consistent, and do what you say you will do. Articulate that you want the children to learn, and then show them that you are willing to go the extra mile to ensure that they do. These acts will help students learn to trust you and the larger community. "Children have to trust that their teacher cares about their education," says O'Brien. Having the capacity to trust allows a child to focus on what's important—learning.

3. *Staying In Control:*

Several studies have shown that the ability to inhibit impulsive mental, verbal, and physical responses and remain engaged in goal-directed thinking without calling out, fidgeting, or responding to provocation is key for school success. In a study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, researchers at Pennsylvania State University followed 141 3- to 5-year-olds from low-income homes. The children who had the strongest regulatory abilities tended to do as well and sometimes better than less regulated children who had higher IQs, says lead researcher Clancy Blair, an associate professor of human development at Penn State. The same is true of older children.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania studied 164 eighth graders and found that the least impulsive and most self-disciplined of the group had better grades and study habits and got into more selective high schools than their peers with higher IQs but less controlled behavior. "By the time children start school, they are expected to sufficiently regulate impulsivity in order to engage in learning experiences with teachers and classmates," says Blair. Depending on the age of your students, introducing simple lessons in controlling impulsivity into your classroom can go a long way toward helping kids learn to focus. One common approach is to encourage kids to "think aloud" as they complete a project or problem, saying or whispering each step they perform. This process can help boost the kind of silent self-talk that comes naturally to more disciplined kids.



4. *Having Curiosity:*

Curiosity may be the key to success on a number of levels, academic and otherwise, and may even be more important overall than happiness. Curiosity leads to mindfulness, says Todd Kashdan, a professor at George Mason University and author of *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*. Mindfulness is the engaged, satisfied state of being one feels when absorbed in a meaningful task, be it achieving an A in class or organizing a blood drive.

According to Kashdan, teachers are in a unique position to foster curiosity in the classroom and put their kids on the road to mindfulness and mental health. How to do it? Rote memorization of facts in a social studies class on the Civil War is the enemy of the curious mind, Kashdan says. Whenever possible, banish rote learning and help students understand events from different perspectives. A discussion on whether the Civil War might have been a bad or good thing for a Southern mill owner, a Northern shipping tycoon, a slave, or the President promotes the kind of thinking that will pay off down the road. "Children who are

taught that there is a difference in perspectives maintain the mental and emotional receptiveness they need to remain curious,” says Kashdan. “High levels of curiosity translates into a child’s ability to think critically, problem-solve more creatively, and even to recognize different strengths in different kinds of kids,” he says.

If you’re still not sure you want to rewrite your Civil War curriculum, think about this: According to Kashdan, as they grow, curious kids are better able to find things to be passionate about in life than their less curious classmates.

5. Expressing Gratitude.

Even for star pupils, school can be difficult at times. But helping children balance some of the challenges of learning with an opportunity to express gratitude leads to warmer feelings toward the teacher and higher levels of school engagement—even among kids who struggle—which can translate to better GPAs. Fringe benefit: Grateful kids also experience less envy and are less materialistic.

How does it work? Kids get into trouble when they feel isolated. Jeffrey Froh, professor of psychology at Hofstra University and a gratitude researcher, says when teachers encourage kids (over 7 years of age) to regularly name and describe what they are grateful for in their lives, children see how interconnected they are to other people. “They see who is helping them,” says Froh.

Not everyone benefits equally. “Some kids have more baseline gratitude than others,” according to Froh. Others take to gratitude easily, and for some, it remains something of an effort. “But when you make the discussion of gratitude in the classroom more fluid and regular, everyone benefits at least a little,” says Froh. Start by sharing your own thank-yous: “Thanks for walking to lunch so quietly.” “Thank you for picking up your candy wrapper.” By modeling gratitude—articulating how people are helping you and your feelings of warmth toward them for their help—you can support children in becoming more grateful themselves.

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