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# Why social and emotional learning is important

## Why social and emotional learning (SEL) is part of KidsMatter

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is about learning how to manage feelings, manage friendships and solve problems. These are essential life skills that support wellbeing and positive mental health. Social and emotional skills promote children's ability to cope with difficulties and help to prevent mental health problems. Children who have developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.

KidsMatter emphasises teaching SEL as a way of promoting children's mental health. SEL provides practical skills that all children can learn and apply to everyday situations. Learning skills such as self-awareness, effective communication and conflict resolution can also help to prevent the development of mental health difficulties in children who might otherwise be vulnerable. In this way teaching children social and emotional skills helps to promote resilience – the capacity to cope and stay healthy in spite of the negative things that happen through life.

## Why SEL is important to schools

Australia's national educational goals for the 21st century, as well as curriculum frameworks for each State and Territory, recognise the importance of children achieving positive outcomes that relate directly to the skills of SEL. In addition, there is broad agreement and research evidence that shows that learning SEL skills can improve academic learning and enhance students' motivation to cooperate and achieve.

Because it emphasises teaching children the skills for positive relationships, SEL is a key strategy for schools in their efforts to reduce bullying and improve caring, respect and responsibility at school. When children are taught specific strategies for recognising and responding to emotions, thinking through challenging situations and communicating effectively, they are less likely to act out frustrations at school and elsewhere.

## What does SEL have to do with learning

Research has shown that children's learning is influenced by a range of social and emotional factors. How well children do at school is affected by things such as:

- how confident children feel about their abilities
- how effectively they are able to manage their own behaviour
- how well they can concentrate and organise themselves
- how effectively they can solve problems
- how positively they are able to get on with teaching staff and with peers
- how effectively they take into account others' needs
- how well they can understand and accept responsibilities.

## How SEL is taught

A number of programs for school-based teaching of SEL skills have been developed in Australia and internationally. For the KidsMatter trial, schools will be selecting the program (or programs) that best suit their particular needs. SEL programs that have been shown through research to improve children's social and emotional competence are more likely to achieve goals related to improving students' mental health. KidsMatter provides schools with detailed information about programs and the research evidence for their effectiveness. During the trial phase KidsMatter Project Officers provide support and professional development for staff, and assist schools to select programs and implement school wide teaching of SEL.

School wide classroom teaching of SEL allows staff and students to share a common understanding of what SEL is all about. Importantly, the emphasis in teaching SEL needs to be not just on learning about emotions and relationships, but on learning practical skills that children can apply across a range of situations at school, at home and in the broader community. Classroom teaching needs to be offered regularly to maximise the benefits. Opportunities for learning need to be coordinated across the school so that children can continue to develop their skills with age and experience.

Children learn SEL skills most effectively when they are also reinforced at home. Many SEL programs include components for involving the family and community in promoting SEL. This gives parents and carers the chance to learn about the particular approach your school is taking and what you can do to support your children's SEL learning. In this way school-based social and emotional learning offers gains all round – for students, for schools and for families.

## The SEL framework

Many teaching staff and schools already incorporate some aspects of SEL into their teaching. The KidsMatter approach looks at what schools are already doing and asks them to evaluate how systematically and effectively they are teaching SEL. It provides them with a framework for planning, teaching and evaluating SEL to help ensure that from year to year children can build social and emotional skills that are relevant and appropriate for their age and skill level.

The KidsMatter approach to SEL is based on the model developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an internationally recognised lead organisation for research into SEL. The diagram outlines the five core competencies that CASEL has identified as central to SEL.



These five social and emotional skill areas are viewed as essential for the development of good mental health. Structured teaching of these SEL competencies, and opportunities for students to practise and generalise them in the classroom, school and wider community, are also crucial to implementing effective SEL. KidsMatter encourages schools to communicate with families about their work in teaching and promoting children's SEL. Informing and working with families on the development of children's SEL competencies has been found to increase the benefits for children.

Adapted from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2006)<sup>1</sup>

## Supporting SEL skills at home

For children to develop social and emotional skills they need guidance that is matched to their level of development, as well as practice. In addition to learning about SEL at school, parents and carers can encourage children to use SEL skills in everyday interactions at home. Prompting and encouraging children to apply their learning in this way helps them develop their skills. Here we provide two examples that show how everyday situations can be used as opportunities for supporting children's SEL skill development.

The first example is based on the story in the accompanying information sheet titled *Why feelings are important*. Voula was very excited about a family outing. But her behaviour was very annoying to the rest of her family, especially to her baby brother.

The following table considers the problem, the skills Voula needs to learn, and how a parent or carer might support her learning.

Skill	The problem	Needs to learn	How to support
<b>Self awareness</b>	Doesn't recognise she is wound up.	To recognise she is feeling excited and how it affects her.	<i>Name it:</i> "You seem pretty excited. You might tire yourself out using up all that energy before we even get there!"
<b>Social awareness</b>	Doesn't take account of others' needs.	To understand how others have different feelings and needs from hers.	<i>Ask/explain:</i> "See how the baby is getting upset? He wants you to stop poking him."
<b>Self management</b>	Doesn't know how to contain her excitement.	To be able to be excited without annoying others.	<i>Redirect:</i> "Let's see if you can use that energy to help us get ready."

In the next example Wendy, who is 10 years old, is angry because her young preschooler sister, Meg, has scribbled all over the homework she had left on the kitchen table. Wendy is angry with Meg and angry with her mother for allowing this to happen.

By looking at the ways that Wendy could use SEL skills we can see how she could be supported to solve this problem and further her skills for effectively managing other similar problems in the future.

Skill	Needs to learn	How to support
<b>Self awareness</b>	To recognise that she is angry and remember that she can work this out calmly.	<i>Show you understand:</i> "I can understand why you would feel angry." <i>Prompt:</i> "Let's think this through."
<b>Social awareness</b>	To understand her sister's point of view: as a preschooler she thinks the homework is just paper to draw on.	<i>Encourage perspective-taking:</i> "Meg didn't realise it was important. I don't think she did it on purpose – do you?"
<b>Self management</b>	To use strategies that help her to calm down.	<i>Show and encourage:</i> "We can sort this out better when we do it calmly."
<b>Responsible decision-making</b>	To not leave homework lying around.	<i>Ask:</i> "What do you need to do to fix it this time? What can you do next time so it won't happen again?"
<b>Relationship skills</b>	To be able to discuss the issue with a parent or carer and to explain her feelings to Meg in a calm way.	<i>Show and praise:</i> "How about telling Meg that you're unhappy and that you don't want her to draw on your things again?" "Thanks for working it out calmly. I'm impressed with the way you've handled it."

It's important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children.

Further ideas for supporting children's social and emotional learning (SEL) are provided in the accompanying materials:

- *What social and emotional learning is all about*
- *Why feelings are important*
- *Supporting kids' confidence*
- *Supporting children's social and emotional learning – Suggestions for parents and carers*
- *Supporting children's social and emotional learning – Suggestions for teaching staff*

1. The Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2006). *Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide*. Chicago, IL: Author

## Keys to supporting SEL skills development

It's important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children. Parents and carers and schools working together to help children develop social and emotional skills can really make a positive difference for children's mental health.

### General principles

- Get involved – find out about the SEL program your school is using. Learn the language and basics and look for opportunities to apply them at home.
- Talk about feelings – help kids explore theirs.
- Be a model – use the skills yourself and show kids how they work. Parents and carers don't have to be perfect: showing them you can make a mistake and learn from it can be really helpful too.
- Be a guide – turn difficulties into learning opportunities.
- Acknowledge and appreciate – provide explicit feedback and praise.



For further information on SEL see the accompanying KidsMatter list *Social and emotional learning - other resources*.

Further information on KidsMatter is available at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)



This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)