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EQUIPPING STAFF WITH STRATEGIES TO INTENTIONALLY SUPPORT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) includes learning to be aware of and manage emotions, work well with others, and persevere when faced with challenges. Youth programs develop SEL by intentionally providing young people an opportunity to engage in real-world projects, work in teams, take on meaningful roles, face challenges, and experience the accompanying emotional ups and downs. To do so effectively, child and youth care workers need practical tools and strategies that support SEL skill-building. They need to be fluent in the concepts and language of SEL, and aware of their own SEL competencies and cultural values before than are ready to help support SEL with young people. “Practitioners play an influential role in social and emotional learning of the young people they work with, but it does not happen by accident” (Blyth, Olson, & Walker, 2017, p. 1).

Social Emotional Learning in Practice: A Toolkit of Practical Strategies and Resources is a freely downloadable and printable PDF that is available online. It includes activities, templates, and tools organized to help program staff: (a) enhance their knowledge of SEL, their own SEL skills and values, and how their program supports SEL; (b) establish expectations, give feedback, and integrate reflection; (c) infuse SEL into youth program activities; and (d) collect data for program improvement.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, professionalism, community of learners, advocacy

Literature Review

Drawing from brain science, medicine, economics, psychology, and education, a council of distinguished scientists affirmed that social, emotional, and cognitive skills are all essential to success in school, careers, and in life, and they can be effectively learned in the context of trusted ties to caring and competent adults (Jones & Kahn, 2017). A landmark report offering recommendations for re-envisioning learning to encompass its social, emotional and cognitive dimension underscored that “young people are shaped by all the formal and informal learning spaces in schools and in the community” (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019, p. 26). This includes spaces like youth development programs, health and social service agencies, civic organizations, faith-based groups, libraries, museums and beyond.

Those working in those spaces—child and youth care workers—need to understand and model strong social and emotional skills. In schools, “social and emotional competencies influence everything from teacher–student relationships to classroom management to effective instruction to teacher burnout” (Jones, Bouffard & Weissbourd, 2013, p. 26). Further, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that teachers with stronger SEL competencies have more positive relationships with students, manage their classrooms more effectively, and implement SEL programs with greater fidelity. This supports having SEL programs begin with activities to build staff SEL skills as a precursor to programming for young people (Maurer & Brackett, 2004).

Social Emotional Learning in Practice: A Toolkit of Practical Strategies and Resources

Equipping Staff

The first section of the toolkit has activities to help youth program staff build their understanding of SEL, recognize their own SEL skills and cultural values, and consider how their program sequence supports and aligns with high quality youth programs that support SEL skills (e.g., SEL + Program Map, Safe-r Corners, Quality Learning Environment). Staff need to be fluent in the concepts and language of SEL in order to be effective. We use our Ways of Being model (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2017a) as teaching tool to guide conversations about social and emotional learning, regardless of the specific SEL framework or assessment tool being used. Next one sample activity that can be used with staff to explore how cultural values interface with SEL is presented.

Mapping Cultural Values.

Cultural beliefs, values, and personal identity shape how each person defines success and quality of life. Likewise, the social and emotional skills that are most important for youth to develop will vary based on their own understanding of success. Use this activity and tool to help staff identify personal cultural values and preferences across ten cultural dimensions (e.g., communication, conflict, time, teamwork) that influence social and emotional learning. Understanding how staff member’s own cultural background, values, and identity shape their social and emotional learning lens will equip them to identify SEL goals that may or may not be appropriate for youth in their program. Facilitators have participants complete the mapping activity individually, and then lead a group discussion.

ACYCP competency domain: Cultural and Human Diversity

Group size: If you have more than 8 people, divide into small groups for discussion.

Time required: Allow at least 45 minutes to complete the activity and have a discussion.

Required materials: Copies of Mapping Cultural Values

Procedure: Give everyone 5-10 minutes to complete the Mapping Cultural Values activity. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers. Encourage participants to answer based on their own personal preferences, not the values of the program. Once everyone has completed the map, lead a discussion using some of the questions below.

1. How are your cultural values and preferences similar or different from your peers?
2. How do your own SEL skills + your cultural values and preferences help you in life? How do they hold you back?

3. How might your cultural values and preferences be similar or different from the youth you work with?
4. How do your cultural values influence your definition of success in social and emotional learning?

Reflecting on just one cultural dimension at a time, discuss what SEL skills are most helpful on each end of the spectrum? Write these skills next to each dimension. Consider how the cultural values and preferences of the staff impact your program: What can you do to be more culturally responsive as you support social and emotional learning in your program?

Adaptations: As a group, complete the Mapping Cultural Values activity from the perspective of your program's values. Consider how staff and youths' personal cultural values are similar or different from program values. Review your SEL+ Program Map (or complete it for the first time). What cultural values are reflected in your SEL+ Program Map? How can you make changes to integrate the cultural values and preferences of youth into your program design? Have youth complete the Mapping Cultural Values activity. Invite them to consider what SEL skills are most important to them, given their values and definition of success.

Creating the Learning Environment

The second section of the toolkit focuses on how SEL skills can be "caught" versus "taught" (Blyth, 2018). Attending to the environment and culture of a youth program plays an important part in social and emotional learning. This includes ways that routines, behavior expectations, and conflict resolution processes within the program support SEL, and incorporates integrating effective feedback, reflection and emotion management. This section includes tools and templates to help staff establish group and individual expectations, give effective feedback, and integrate reflection and emotion management. It also includes several icebreaker activities with an SEL spin.

Designing Impactful Learning Experiences

The third section of the toolkit includes activities to deliver or teach directly with young people. Programs that focus on specific skill development using sequenced and active learning strategies and focused and explicit skill content are consistently successful in promoting social and emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Social and emotional learning takes place when youth are engaged in activities that allow them to practice and develop specific skills. Activities in this section help youth explore their individual and community identity (Identity Wheel, Community Asset Mapping); practice sharing gratitude; understand, express and manage emotions (SEL Superpowers Board Game, Flipping Your Lid); learn about empathy, teamwork, and group norms (Power of Empathy, Eight Arrows); and develop clear goals and work toward consensus (Goal Sandwich, Consensus Building). Also included are tools to build an Emotion Word Bank and an SEL Reading List for Youth. Next one sample activity that can be equally helpful for adult staff to explore and practice empathy versus sympathy is presented.

The Power of Empathy.

This activity is equally helpful for adult staff. Use this role-playing activity and animated video clip to help participants learn about and practice giving and receiving empathy. Connecting with and supporting others is essential. That's why empathy—the ability to identify with other's struggles and support them—is so important, especially with the young people staff work with. Empathy is a skill that develops by practicing giving and receiving empathy. In this activity, participants discuss the difference between empathy and sympathy, watch a 3-minute video, discuss four attributes of empathy, and participate in and debrief a role-playing activity.

ACYCP competency domain: Relationship and Communication.

Group size: any size.

Time required: 20-30 minutes

Required materials: The 3-minute video created by the Royal Society of the Arts is available on [Vimeo](#) or [YouTube](#) or [download the MP4 \(https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-shorts/2013/12/Brene-Brown-on-Empathy\)](https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-shorts/2013/12/Brene-Brown-on-Empathy).

Procedure: Explain that the purpose of this activity is to learn about and practice empathy, an important skill for supporting friends and family. Have a discussion about the concept of empathy compared to sympathy. What comes to mind when you think of the word sympathy (feeling sorry, providing comfort or assurance)? What comes to mind when you think of the word empathy (feeling with people, putting yourself in their shoes)? If you share a

struggle, worry or challenge, how do you want people to respond (“that sucks”, “I’ve been there”, “it could be worse”. “why don’t you...”, “it sounds like...”, “I’m sorry”). Watch the 3-minute video. Discuss the four attributes of empathy that Brown references:

1. To be able to see the world as others see it. This requires putting your own “stuff” aside to see the situation through someone else’s eyes.
2. To be nonjudgmental. Judgment of another person’s situation discounts the experience and is an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of the situation.
3. To understand another person’s feelings. We have to be in touch with our own feelings in order to understand someone else’s.
4. To communicate your understanding of that person’s feelings. Rather than saying, “At least you...” or “It could be worse...” try, “I’ve been there, and that really hurts,” or, “It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it.”

Explain that Brown defines empathy as a skill that develops by practicing giving and receiving empathy. It’s a skill, and it takes practice. Have participants spend the next 10-15 minutes practicing empathy with the following activity. Have them get in groups of three (or pairs). Each person in the group will take turns having each role. Describe the three roles:

1. One person is the fox, someone willing to talk about a challenge they are having in their life. (Depending on the maturity of the group, consider giving youth scenarios. Potential scenarios might include: receiving a low grade on a test, the loss of a pet, conflict with friends, etc.)
2. The other person is the bear who listens and resists the urge to offer advice or try to fix it. The bear might say phrases like: “It sounds like...” “Thank you for sharing with me.”
3. The third person is the reindeer who offers silver linings: “At least...”.

Debrief the activity with some of these questions:

1. Foxes, what did it feel like to have someone listen to you?
2. Bears, was it challenging to not give advice? What were some of your responses to the fox?
3. Reindeers, how did it feel to offer silver linings?
4. For everyone: What is challenging about expressing empathy rather than sympathy? What do you see as the main differences between sympathy and empathy? What surprised you most about the activity? How will this activity affect your actions moving forward?

Caution: This activity works best with groups that are comfortable with each other. Remind participants who play the foxes to only share a situation they are comfortable discussing.

Adaptations: Use this activity with youth or adult staff. To learn more about The Power of Empathy, you can watch [Brown’s complete RSA lecture](#). You can also watch her very popular TED Talk on [The Power of Vulnerability](#).

Using Data for Improvement

The fourth and final section is focused on practical strategies to use reflection and data to improve practices to support social and emotional learning. This section includes data-centered tools, templates and activities to measure change over time (Emoji Data Dashboard), several creative data collection strategies (Postcards Home, Instagram Posts), a tool for youth to provide feedback to the adults that support them in learning social and emotional skills (Staff Support Card), an SEL SMART Goals Tracker, and a checklist to help staff select SEL outcome measurement tools.

Objectives and Competencies Addressed

The objectives of the toolkit are for program staff to (a) increase their understanding of SEL, (b) feel more comfortable explaining SEL to others, (c) be more aware of their own social and emotional skills (d) better understand how their program content can support SEL skill-building, (e) have more strategies to infuse SEL into their program’s learning environment, (f) incorporate SEL into program activities with youth, and (g) increase their use of data to improve their SEL practices.

Each toolkit item addresses different competencies for staff and/or youth, and those competencies are noted in the introduction to each item. For example, the CYC competency of Professionalism is addressed with the Quick Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment by building staff members' self-awareness and recognizing their personal strengths and weaknesses. However as a whole, the toolkit best supports the CYC competency of Developmental Practice Method with its emphasis on environmental design (Creating the Learning Environment) and program planning (Designing Impactful Learning Experiences).

Procedures/Process (e.g., group size, time required, required materials, physical setting)

Youth program staff can use this flexible set of practical tools, templates and activities with their staff and program participants to increase intentional practices to support social and emotional learning. As one user reported:

It is easy to "grab and go" and visually appealing. It is helpful that the exercises and activities are designed to be flexible and adapted to a particular program, rather than having to independently adapt or select from a full curriculum when it wasn't designed that way.

The activities are designed to fit in a single session and can be integrated into existing program plans. Each activity or tool provides background (Why This Matters), facilitation logistics including time and materials required (Getting Started), detailed instructions (How to Do/Use It), and extension or adaptation suggestions (Take it Further). Most activities are for groups, and take less than one hour. Activities can be used in any order and modified to meet one's needs. The templates are ready-to-use resources that can be tailored for each program context. The tools include background information and suggestions for discussion.

Cautions and Adaptations

The toolkit was designed with universal audiences in mind. Items may need to be modified to fit targeted audiences such as those with special needs or trauma. Other cautions are noted within a given toolkit item. For example, Gratitude Candle is recommended for groups who already know each other, and the Staff Support Card is not to be used as a high-stakes evaluation.

While the toolkit was designed primarily for those working with middle school-aged youth, with slight modifications the activities are appropriate for other age groups. One user reported:

The toolkit offers suggestions for how to extend each activity, so that it can be customized based on the youth worker's knowledge of what works well for their group. I also love that the activities are rooted in practice with youth, that they would work in real youth work situations, not just on a theoretical level.

Supportive Material

The research-based SEL toolkit was initially developed as a companion to our 3-hour training, [Social and Emotional Learning in Practice](#). The workshop results in participants' (a) feeling comfortable explaining SEL to co-workers, (b) understanding how their program content can support SEL, and (c) having strategies to infuse SEL into their program content. The toolkit was designed to extend the reach to all audiences interested in ways to infuse SEL into youth programming as a free online resource. Two issue briefs provide the foundation for the training and toolkit:

- [Ways of Being: A Model for Social & Emotional Learning](#) (Blyth, Olson, & Walker, 2017) was developed out of conversations with thought leaders who recognized the need for a jargon-free teaching tool for practitioners, youth, and families to deepen their understanding of social and emotional learning.

- [Intentional Practices to Support Social & Emotional Learning](#) (Blyth, Olson, & Walker, 2017) outlines four strategies that serve as the organizational framework for our SEL trainings and toolkit. Research shows that the integration of specific strategies is likely more effective than implementing a new curriculum (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010).

Finally, a new addition to our [SEL training suite](#) is a free self-guided online course, [Social and emotional learning + well-being](#), that introduces the tools, templates and activities from toolkit through four modules that take about 30 minutes each.

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