

# All Children *Need* Social and Emotional Well-being

*The survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence as it does on the development of technological knowledge and skills.*<sup>1</sup>

*The need to refocus American schools on the holistic development of children is profound. One national survey discovered, for example, that among 148,000 middle and high school students, well under half felt they had developed social competencies such as empathy, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. Only 29% indicated that their school provided caring, encouraging environments. Other research has found that as many as 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school, and 30% of high school students engage in multiple high risk behaviors such as substance abuse, sexual activity, violence, and attempted suicide.*<sup>2</sup>

“Refocus schools on the holistic development of children”? The rising tide of dysfunctional behaviors throughout the world clearly supports social and emotional, as well as academic, learning.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, joining these

<sup>1</sup> Darling-Hammond, 2015, p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405.

<sup>3</sup> e.g., Levine, 2013.

three goals is not likely to be pursued any time soon. The “whole child” and “well-being” are objectives most parents favor for their children, but not if they get in the way of going to a good college or getting a good job. Since teaching for holistic well-being tends to take time from academic learning, it is most often remanded to the back burner of the educational stove.

Let’s take a closer look at well-being, which refers to “the psychological capacity to cope with the demands arising across time, circumstances, and setting.” In this book, we call training for well-being “social and emotional learning (SEL).” In international education, SEL is known by a variety of names: “education for mutual understanding,” “peace education,” “values education,” “multicultural/intercultural education,” “human rights education,” “life skills,” “citizenship, humanitarian or emotional education,” “emotional intelligence,” and “education for sustainable development.”<sup>4</sup> Depending on the area of the world, the meaning of SEL also differs somewhat:

Whereas Europe and Latin America commonly emphasize [SEL] links with human rights, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa highlight connections with a return to indigenous, cultural and religious values. Other differences exist across countries, such as a strong focus on the importance of citizenship education in enhancing national economic productivity in some places, and the role of citizenship education and the prevention of aggression and violence in others.<sup>5</sup>

We distinguish SEL from the other educational goal most societies have: academic learning (AL). AL refers to learning the knowledge and skills of the several subject-matter areas (math, science, etc.). We wish both SEL and AL would take place in schools everywhere. However, with so many countries concentrating on teaching and measuring AL, this goal appears unlikely. Therefore, we believe that for the most part, SEL will have to be fostered by parents and other adult members of the family.

Most of us agree on what social/emotional traits we want our children to learn in life. They need to:

- Know who they are and be mindful of the repercussions of their actions.
- Control themselves and make good judgments.

<sup>4</sup> Torrente et al., 2015, p. 566.

<sup>5</sup> Torrente et al., 2015, p. 567.

- Refrain from drug and alcohol abuse and abstain from premature sexual activity.
- Understand when to compete and when to cooperate.
- Neither bully nor be bullied.
- Build successful friendships and to become a leader when appropriate.
- Think critically and be creative problem finders and solvers.

In short, we want children to have social and emotional well-being. And this, of course, derives from SEL. Some parents think that schools should provide this instruction. Others believe it ought to take place at home. Wherever you think it ought to happen, clearly it isn't happening enough. Here's an example of what we mean:



In one ninth-grade class, a group of bored students calling themselves the "Six Sexy Sisters" decided to see if they could "bounce" some other girl from their school. They wondered if they could actually get her to transfer to another school without them getting caught. To add to the challenge, they chose their victim from among ordinary girls, not someone with an obvious handicap. They put 10 names into a hat and drew out a slip with Jessica C. on it. Then they began their online bullying campaign:

- When Jessica posted her Sweet 16 pictures online, they wrote anonymously "I'd rather cut off my arm than touch you, you're so ugly!"
- Another post: "Only cool girls wear the kind of pants you had on today, and you shouldn't wear them, because you are definitely not cool!"
- In an orchestrated attack, the girls signed onto a site, registering as Jennifer. Several members on the site were then attacked, and Jessica was blamed.
- Posing as a guy named Fred, they wrote on Jessica's Facebook page, "I hate u, everyone hates u ... u should just die!"
- Using her boyfriend's name, they posted that he thought she was "just a slutty girl," and was through with her.

Jessica's school is in a state that has a mandated school policy: no tolerance for bullying. When Jessica complained to the principal, naming the six girls she suspected were bullying her, he asked each of the girls if she were guilty. Each denied participating, so the principal issued an announcement

to all students that he would not tolerate bullying, thus fulfilling what he thought the mandate called for. The SSSs continued their vicious attacks with impunity. Now Jessica's family is suing the principal and district for nearly \$2 million. They have a good chance of getting this money, which, of course, the district can ill afford. Would this have happened if this school had offered SEL instruction?

As reported in an online study, "Eighty percent of teens say they have read or spread gossip online; more than 50% say they have seen Web sites that made fun of their peers. Yet there seems to be a code of silence—what happens online stays online—leaving those who might help, in school and at home, in the dark"<sup>6</sup>



So how should society address social and emotional learning? One educational specialist answers this way: "SEL has gained traction in recent years, driven in part by concerns over school violence, bullying and teen suicide. But while prevention programs tend to focus on a single problem, the goal of SEL is grander: to instill a deep psychological intelligence that will help children regulate their emotions."<sup>7</sup> Teachers used to include SEL in their curricula, but not many do any more.

You will find few cross-disciplinary class projects, creativity exercises, or anti-bullying lessons these days in classrooms in the western world. The east is not that different.<sup>8</sup> Most educators are too busy imparting facts and academic skills, because their very jobs depend on how well their students succeed on high-stakes tests. These mostly multiple-choice tests primarily measure factual knowledge. Of course our children need to know these facts, but they must also experience and use SEL.

From newspaper headlines to parenting journals and forums, in parent-teacher groups and along the sidelines at school sporting events, SEL is becoming a hot topic. A national group, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), has been formed, and about a third of the states in the United States have CASEL associations. Many teachers support and belong to these groups, as they are unhappy with the

<sup>6</sup> beinggirl.com/, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kahn, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Zhao, 2011.

current situation, too. Most did not go into the profession so they could drill children on facts. As one Seattle teacher puts it, “I am opposed to these tests because they narrow what education is supposed to be about. I think collaboration, imagination, and critical thinking skills are all left off these tests and can’t be assessed by circling A, B, C, or D.”<sup>9</sup> Many teachers would like to include SEL in the curriculum, but only if the instruction meets one of the Common Core State Standards. Because large numbers of parents have given up on changing school objectives, they are ready to pursue the goals of SEL in their own homes, on their own. Both groups want to learn how, but it looks like parents will have to take the lead.

Here is how one family researcher put it: “This is the actual crisis of parenting today—not whether we’re breast feeding too little or ‘helicoptering’ too much, or feeding our kids the French way or teaching piano with Tiger ferocity, but whether we’re abdicating our biggest responsibility—to make sure kids treat each other [and themselves] humanely.”<sup>10</sup> This concern is not new. Eight years ago, Professor Jonathan Cohen, in a cogent article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, warned us about the looming problem in most U.S. classrooms:

If federal and state policymakers and education colleges continue to ignore the importance of social/emotional competencies, I believe this amounts to a violation of human rights. Our children deserve better. This country deserves better.<sup>11</sup>



## An Example of SEL

It might be said that there are two kinds of people in the world: “hedgehogs” and “foxes.” The hedgehog knows one big thing, the fox knows many things. Hedgehogs are in the majority. When they get a job with an organization, they stay there for many years and work their way up from within. They don’t know much about how people outside their corporation do things, but they are experts within their business field.

Foxes, on the other hand, move from place to place. They know lots of ways to do things, but are seldom experts in any of them. In periods of

<sup>9</sup> Zezima, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> J. Weiss, 2013, p. A13.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 2006.

stability, hedgehogs are clearly the most valuable employees, but when things start changing quickly, the organization needs its flexible foxes.

Here's the rub. "A 2013 survey by a consulting firm of more than 500 executives revealed that hedgehogs 'have no clothes.' That is, a whopping 93% of respondents believed their company's long-term success depended on its ability to innovate, yet only 18% felt they had a competitive edge."<sup>12</sup> What lesson does this convey? Many countries in the world have too many hedgehogs and not enough foxes. How can we change this? Parents and professional educators must get better at delivering SEL to the children, so they can know when to be a reliable hedgehog, and when to be a creative fox!



## **Reciprocal Development and SEL**

Another important aspect of SEL is the nature of the human brain. Cerebral structures develop according to a principle known as "reciprocal development." According to this process, changes in all animals are affected by the environment, which in turn is affected by changes in animals. Here are two examples:

- As trees grew taller, the necks of giraffes grew longer, and as taller giraffes ate leaves higher on a tree, leaves grew out of the top, making the tree taller yet.
- In the nineteenth century there were white and black moths. For some reason the bark of trees grew darker, and before long there were many more black moths than white.

The development of the human brain has operated in exactly this way. For example, some people are born with genes that give them a tendency toward being shy. As a result, their parents tend to be protective of them, which makes them even shyer. This has an effect on their hormonal balances, especially their estrogen, which in turn affects the direction of their brain development.

The opposite is true of children who are born with a tendency toward assertiveness and extraversion. Such children often have the confidence to contradict their parents and go against directions. Their parents, who also

<sup>12</sup> Stanford U, 2013, p. 7.

are likely to have a tendency toward assertiveness, are likely to respond to the child's disobedience by being aggressive. This can make her be even more assertive, and because of the hormonal secretions that go along with this behavior, her brain is affected.

Another example of reciprocal development has to do with reading ability. Some children are born with a disability for reading; they may even be dyslexic. Others have a genetic makeup that favors reading ability. One study found that the number of new words learned by the first group in one year is equal to the number of new words learned by the second group in two days! It is likely that the number of words a person has in her vocabulary is highly related to her ability for social and emotional learning. After all, if you don't have the words for new concept, you are unlikely to learn it. Once again, we see the interdependence of academic learning with SEL. Too much emphasis on AL hurts learning of both types.

## **A Brief History of the SEL Movement**

The birth of SEL as a field and movement can be tied to the research of Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences. His work helped us understand that there are several kinds of "smart." Beyond reading, writing, and math skills are social/emotional "intelligences" that are less test-friendly, but equally essential. Gardner identified eight types of intelligence and speculates that there may be more. Building on Gardner's work, Daniel Goleman<sup>13</sup> coined the term "emotional intelligence" to describe the ways in which we humans make sense of and act in the social world. Of course this is a reconsideration of what philosophers have been saying for ages. It involves a new look at the core values espoused by many of the world's major religions, such as "the Golden Rule." Goleman and others created an organization to move this work forward. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning has become an important resource for educators, parents, and civic leaders who want to teach children SEL.

CASEL defines SEL as "developing the ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Goleman, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, Roger Weissberg, CASEL, Nov. 2015.

Research and evaluation studies that describe the impact of effective SEL programs, summarized by CASEL, suggest that these programs help children have:

- A deeper sense of connection to school.
- Improved skills for setting goals.
- Greater capacity to solve problems.
- Better self-discipline.
- Finer character and responsible values.

Several studies have also shown that SEL helps to improve students' academic success. CASEL has identified five basic social/emotional abilities. Let's take a brief look at how they appear in the life of a child.

- *Self-awareness.* As children develop they begin to recognize the emotions of others (the new parent's excitement in the hospital nursery, exhaustion from lack of sleep, and pride in the toddler's first steps). They also learn to recognize and then find words for their own emotions—first the simple ones (like happiness, sadness, and fear) and then the more complex ones (like disappointment, pride, worry, and anticipation). Along the way, they are learning how to manage their emotional world. They ask for help, stay silent in the face of fear, and talk excitedly about some new accomplishment. The ability to recognize and manage emotions is the first step in successful social living.
- *Self-management.* All children face hard times—although some must deal with intense challenges like homelessness, poverty, abuse, or other traumas that others fortunately avoid. Handling challenging situations effectively is one key to healthy development. Researchers have called this resilience, courage, and hopefulness. Handling difficult situations effectively gives a boost to the other four SEL skills. In fact, they all depend on each other for a person's ideal development.
- *Social awareness.* Infants express concern and caring long before they have speech—when they offer a toy or snack, or even cry at the sight of others crying. For most children, this ability expands to include broader and broader sets of people, from caregiver to play group to schoolmates. For some children, the circle of care and concern stays closed—perhaps because they have a hard time balancing the needs of others, or because



their history of hurt does not allow them to reach out (more on this in the next chapter). In both cases, social success requires the ability to express and then act on feelings. Children who are leaders usually have these twin abilities: they care about others and they can express that concern. Children who are isolated and lonely usually do not have these abilities, or they are unable to use them well.

- *Responsible decision-making.* Successful children, like successful adults, usually make responsible decisions. They make responsible decisions when they find and keep positive friends at school, take care of their health in a world that pushes substance abuse, and work hard at school and home.
- *Relationship skills.* We are all in relationships—but not all of them are positive. Positive relationships set limits that are caring and loving, and involve listening as much as talking. In positive relationships, children ask adults for help and see what happens next. They test limits and evaluate how others react to their misbehavior. The essence of a good relationship is *validation*—when an intimate friend or partner relates to your experience by acknowledging a confidence from you and then sharing a similar one (more on this magical process in the next chapter).

## Parent–Teacher Alliances Need Support

As for parents, the answer is simple: parents (and grandparents) are a child's first teachers. There is truth in the adage, "Only parents and grandparents can truly raise a child, because they are the only ones for whom that child's success is vital." These six people have a special love for and intimacy with their offspring. They care about them when fever comes at two in the morning, as much as when the first words come in the afternoon.

Teachers spend the most productive part of most weekdays observing what the child needs, how she communicates those needs, and how she responds to the needs of others. Parents and teachers often have special, one-on-one time with children—this provides crucial chances to teach social/emotional skills. And perhaps most importantly, a parent or a teacher can serve as a model for what it means to be a successful human being. Collaborations between the two are obviously superior to the independent actions of either one.

## **Using our Strategies to Teach SEL**

Our book recommends strategies you can use to help children develop and strengthen humane values and skills in their own lives. It offers easy-to-follow exercises that include:

- Clear instructions for teaching the SEL strategy.
- The age group for whom the strategy was designed (plus recommended alterations for its use with the other age group).
- The goal(s) sought.
- Descriptions of materials you may need to implement the strategy.
- Suggested scripts you might say or paraphrase to instruct your child.

We hope that teachers, coaches, and counselors will use these strategies, but in this book we speak primarily to parents, as we assume that the professionals can easily adapt our strategies for classroom, homework, or therapeutic use.

Learning how to use these strategies and employing them need not take an inordinate amount of your time. Our strategies can be adapted easily to your children's ability levels, from ages 6 to 15. With each of these activities, we include specific exemplars for younger and older children, which you can then adapt as you see fit. You will probably want help from others with this vital task, and in Chapter 13 we suggest where and how you can get it. In the last chapter, we try to anticipate the future of the SEL movement, including new techniques that involve electronic devices and social networks. And finally, on our website ([www.wiley.com/go/daceywellbeing](http://www.wiley.com/go/daceywellbeing)), we provide ancillary materials and sources. We applaud you for caring enough to read this book, and sincerely hope we have provided you with everything you will need to be highly successful in this most important goal.