

Best Practices in Teaching Social & Emotional Learning

Summary: Decades of research have shown that teaching social & emotional learning skills to students produces a decrease in behavioral issues and an increase in academic achievement. In an article for *Better: Evidence-Based Education*, a pair of professors summarize the overall conclusions research has drawn about what works best in this arena.

Practical Applications

In analyzing over 300 separate research studies, the authors found a consensus that students who go through social & emotional learning (SEL) programs display “higher levels of pro-social behavior, reduced levels of conduct problems and emotional distress, and enhanced academic performance including up to an 11 percentile gain in school achievement.” This held true for students of all ages and backgrounds, even those displaying behavioral problems already. SEL, briefly defined, is having “the knowledge, skills and attitude to:

- Recognize and maintain emotions;
- Set and achieve positive goals;
- Demonstrate care and concern for others;
- Establish and maintain positive relationships;
- Make responsible decisions; and
- Handle interpersonal situations effectively”

The key features of effective SEL programs are made up by the acronym SAFE – Sequential, Active, Focused and Explicit. There is no one best program, but an effective program should be:

- **Sequential:** The program advances through social and emotional skills in an ordered and logical manner that integrates the skills together.
- **Active:** The program employs active learning strategies (as opposed to just lectures, e.g.) to promote skills
- **Focused:** The program focuses “sufficient attention on skill development” as opposed to simply discussing topics
- **Explicit:** The program establishes explicit learning goals.

In addition, the authors make notes about setting programs up for success:

- The programs should be monitored to help with quality (e.g. by administrators or other educators) and executed smoothly.
- Both in-school and after-school programs were impactful, leading the authors to suggest that “combined programs would have even more potential.”
- Teachers and after-school personnel should receive or seek out professional development in the area of teaching SEL.

Conclusion and Citation

Evidence-based social & emotional learning programs should be implemented in classroom, school and after-school settings to bolster students’ skills in all areas of life.

Durlak, J. & Weissberg, R. “Social and Emotional Learning Programs that Work.” *Better: Evidence-Based Education* (Winter 2010), pp. 4-5. <http://bit.ly/lgi0C> (subscription only).