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4 Reasons Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Improves Student Outcomes

An SEL expert shares the benefits of teaching our teens these skills

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER)

PUBLISHED ON: SEPTEMBER 30, 2019



Editor's note: This article was sponsored by [University Prep \(https://www.universityprep.org\)](https://www.universityprep.org).

Imagine there's a practice that makes middle school more bearable for your student, a way to help her manage her emotions when she's already dreading her school's annual jogathon and she realizes it's raining.

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Better yet: Imagine your child's school teaches such a practice, one designed to help her learn how to move through her school days more easily.

That's what social and emotional learning (SEL) programs provide: a way to teach social skills and emotional intelligence in the classroom. "We want to use SEL as a framework to support students to become thoughtful, caring individuals, acting with agency and the ability to build healthy relationships and community," explains Emily Schorr Lesnick, social and emotional learning coordinator at [University Prep](https://www.universityprep.org/) (<https://www.universityprep.org/>), an independent middle and high school in northeast Seattle.

Last year, University Prep hired Schorr Lesnick to be its full-time SEL coordinator with the belief that SEL helps create an optimal learning environment. While some schools add SEL skills to the academic curriculum through SEL lessons presented in home room or health, Schorr Lesnick is helping ensure that SEL is practiced throughout the day – within classrooms, during club meetings and on athletic fields, too.

1 SEL bolsters academic learning

"There is this idea that the social and emotional pieces of development are somehow separate from the academic learning," says [Schorr Lesnick](https://www.universityprep.org/blog/preptalk/p/~board/prep-talk/post/get-to-know-emily-schorr-lesnick-social-and-emotional-learning-coordinator) (<https://www.universityprep.org/blog/preptalk/p/~board/prep-talk/post/get-to-know-emily-schorr-lesnick-social-and-emotional-learning-coordinator>). But the consensus of more than two decades of research into the impact of teaching SEL in schools is that SEL is as critical to student success as the three Rs.

In fact, studies have found that social and emotional skills are related to academic learning. SEL education has been shown to [improve test scores by 11 percent](https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/meta-analysis-child-development-1.pdf) (<https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/meta-analysis-child-development-1.pdf>). (It's obvious when you think about it – of course kids who know how to recognize stress and calm themselves down do better on tests.) "SEL helps students understand who they are as a person, what they bring to others, and how to effectively bring themselves to school and to the world," says Schorr Lesnick. "Unless a student is comfortable in their own skin and in their community, they can't reach for what could be theirs."

2 SEL is a process that needs to be practiced

Just as there are competing math and science curricula, there are several approaches to SEL, including the [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](https://casel.org/) (<https://casel.org/>) (CASEL) and [Making Caring Common](https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/) (<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>). Some schools adopt a curriculum, and others adapt one. Whatever approach schools take, Schorr Lesnick describes five core competencies any SEL curriculum should include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

"These skills have to be taught – we don't just learn them through osmosis," says Schorr Lesnick, who adds that SEL is a process and a practice, not just theory. "Students must practice the process of SEL. Ideally, we can encourage that practice in the classroom, where the stakes are lower."

For example, a heavy homework week is an opportunity to practice self-management and responsible decision-making. Will the student cheat, turn something in late or finish everything but

at a lower quality? At University Prep, SEL lessons presented through the school's daily, hour-long community time give students the opportunity to practice using SEL to make decisions like this.

3 SEL fosters development and helps students build healthy relationships

SEL lessons are also pegged to developmental processes. "I work really closely with the school counselors on the appropriateness of lessons and students' developmental needs," says Schorr Lesnick.

Students are dealing with major transitions in sixth, eighth, ninth and 12th grades; while students in seventh and 10th grades are often preoccupied with relationships. "We have a lot of conversations in middle school around boundaries; how to articulate, respect and mediate boundaries and how to move forward when boundaries are crossed," explains Schorr Lesnick.

4 SEL pairs well with diversity, equity and inclusion work

Although not all schools make the connection, SEL dovetails perfectly with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. "DEI work is a real opportunity to make connections. SEL is learning about yourself and identity is inseparable from our place in the community," says Schorr Lesnick. At University Prep, the programs' efforts are so complementary that the school is piloting a co-project called DEISEL.

"DEISEL is about how to be qualitatively welcoming to all of our diverse students. Students need to have tools and skills to navigate personal issues and cultural encounters. Racial justice requires us to have curiosity instead of judgement when people are different from us," says Schorr Lesnick.

At University Prep, a parent education program offers monthly talks and workshops to keep parents up to speed on SEL and other school community issues. School publications connect parents with resources and help keep them informed about the vocabulary and techniques to support SEL skills development at home.

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For parents who want to help kids learn SEL and reinforce what they're learning at school, Schorr Lesnick recommends reading Ned Johnson and William Stixrud's co-written book, "[The Self-Driven Child: \(https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072KBWB6G?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20\)](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072KBWB6G?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20) The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives." The book presents the science behind SEL while giving parents practical advice on how "to prepare your child for the road, instead of clearing the road for your child."

More generally, Schorr Lesnick says parents can use the news and movies as starting points for

conversations. And we can model our own social and emotional skills, especially by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable in front of our kids and being open about our own continued growth and learning.

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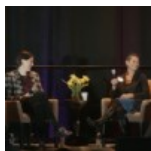
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