

Q&A: Why social and emotional learning is so important for kids right now

9 November 2020, by Carrie MacMillan



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"Emotional intelligence" and "social and emotional learning" are terms parents may hear bandied about by teachers and education leaders. And as kids throughout the country muddle through schooling during a pandemic, honing these skills is especially important, experts say.

But if you only have a vague idea of what [emotional intelligence](#) (EI) and social and emotional learning (SEL) mean and why they matter, you're not alone. Put simply, EI is the ability to identify and manage your emotions and the [emotions of others](#). SEL refers to a process in which children acquire emotional intelligence, develop empathy for others, and learn problem-solving skills.

Before the pandemic, SEL was gaining traction in schools, especially as research has shown that students who manage their emotions perform better academically and have fewer disciplinary issues. Now, as COVID-19 continues and many schools are employing all or partially remote formats, the philosophies associated with SEL are vital in helping students cope.

We checked in with Marc Brackett, Ph.D., founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, which is a part of the Yale Child Study Center, to learn more about SEL. Below, Brackett, who is also the author of "Permission to Feel: The Power of Emotional Intelligence to Achieve Well-Being and Success" (2019, Celadon Books), shares advice for parents.

Where does the term 'emotional intelligence' come from?

The history goes back to 1990, when Peter Salovey (now president of Yale University) co-wrote a scholarly article on emotional intelligence, which most people didn't read. It described EI as the ability to reason with emotions to achieve goals.

And then in 1995, there was a popular book on emotional intelligence by Daniel Goleman and the field of social and emotional learning came out of all of that. At the Center for Emotional Intelligence, we developed RULER [explained next], which is our evidence-based approach to SEL that is now used in 2,500 schools across the United States and other countries.

What is RULER?

There are different models of social and [emotional learning](#) that are built on the theory of emotional intelligence, and RULER is one of them. RULER is an acronym for Recognizing emotions in oneself and other people; Understanding the causes and consequences of those emotions; Labeling emotions with precise words; Expressing emotions; and Regulating emotions.

RULER is an approach, as opposed to a program. It's not something you do on Thursdays at 2 p.m. It's about infusing the principles of emotional intelligence into everything that happens in and out of school, from how the leaders lead, to how the teachers teach, to how students learn, to how

families parent.

How does RULER work in practice?

The first step involves a team from a school (one leader and two teachers or mental health professionals) that attends a special training on the principles and tools of emotional intelligence.

One example of these tools is the Mood Meter, which is a square divided equally into four quadrants of primary colors. Each color represents a category of moods [red signifies anger or frustration; yellow is joy or elation; blue is sadness and despair; green is serenity or satisfaction]. There also is an app that allows users to track their feelings and learn ways to move to another color, if desired.

The Mood Meter helps users identify, label, and regulate their emotions, an important step in developing EI. If children and adults are more mindful of how their emotions affect their actions, they gain greater self-awareness and self-regulation.

After the team has completed the RULER training, they begin to introduce it to faculty and staff and then students. In [early childhood](#) and elementary education, for example, RULER is embedded into curriculum with units designed to build skills about understanding emotion themes and concepts, like the difference between anger and disappointment. RULER also integrates emotion vocabulary into the existing curriculum with feeling word guides for each grade level.

Why is emotional intelligence so important right now?

Our center has done research on the emotional lives of leaders, teachers, and students right now. Everyone is highly anxious. We have more anxiety than ever before in the modern world.

One of the things we say is that when everything is calm and relaxing, life is good, and there are no real problems—no one really thinks about emotional intelligence. But when the sand is kicked in your face—like it feels right now—then people start taking

[emotional intelligence](#) seriously. Everyone is activated. Everyone is easily triggered and people are worrying about their safety and their future. Everyone is looking for strategies.

How can adults help children with emotional intelligence?

Parents and teachers need to be the best possible role models for children. That's why we target our training to adults first. If you are feeling highly anxious and stressed out, you need to demonstrate that you can handle your feelings.

Take a few deep breaths. Go to another room, if that helps you get yourself together, and use positive self-talk. Instead of saying, "Nothing ever works out," you say, "You know what? Right now, we are all safe and we have a loving family."

How can we listen better?

A big part of my work is that there should be no emotion judges and only emotion scientists. Emotion scientists are open and curious and reflective, whereas those who act like emotion judges are closed and critical. All emotions matter. There is no such thing as a bad emotion, including anxiety. Because if anxiety is seen as a bad thing, then kids will adopt that mindset. We need to accept all emotions and use them wisely.

What advice do you have for parents dealing with a child who is stressed or anxious?

Always validate your child's feelings. You can say, "Honey, it's understandable that this is new and we are all going through it." If a child is hyperventilating, you can say, "Let's take some deep breaths together and take a little break or get some water." You may want to have some phrases ready for when you or your child gets frustrated, like, "It's OK to be worried, but I can get through this," or "I'm just learning, and it's OK to make mistakes."

What about advice for parents who are having a moment. How can they reset?

Take a "meta-moment." This is a tool for parents

when they are triggered. It means to pause and activate their best self as a parent. Think about how you want to be seen as a parent right now and then strategize accordingly. When I am triggered by something, I say, "How would the director of the Center for Emotional Intelligence or Marc, the compassionate son/husband, respond?"

Do you advise doing periodic check-ins or is that overdoing things?

You should definitely do emotional check-ins throughout the day. At breakfast, you can ask, "How are you feeling today? What is going on?" and do the same during a lunch break or before dinner. You can say, "Let's talk about your day and how did things go?" Most importantly here, a parent wants to model behavior and not just say that their day was fine, but share how they experienced a lot of different emotions that day.

If the parent says, "I had a very bad meeting and this is what I did to manage my feelings," then you are modeling authentically.

How does remote learning impact school-based social and emotional learning?

It's not easy to do this when schools are teaching remotely, but it's not impossible. It's the people that make the school, not the building. I learned that phrase from one of our best RULER schools. Schools function best when they focus on the relationships among the adults, and tools like the Mood Meter can be done in person or in the virtual world. These skills can easily be taught online.

Can you tell us how mask-wearing in schools affects EI and SEL?

We over estimate our accuracy at reading emotions in people's facial expressions. Masks make it even harder. My hope is that now we will spend more time doing quality check-ins, first asking our students how they're feeling and then listening to what they say, so we can support them.

When should you start teaching your child about emotional intelligence?

It actually starts in the womb. Truthfully, there is good research that a stressed-out mother who is pregnant can create a stressed-out baby. But the essence of our work is that emotion co-regulation starts at birth. When a baby is crying or a child is anxious and overwhelmed, it's our duty to co-regulate those feelings and assuage them.

For kids who worry a lot, especially during this pandemic, you always want to let them know you are doing everything you can to make sure they are safe, that you are doing the right things to protect everyone, and that you are there for them. You want to be a family that talks about all feelings.

Provided by Yale University

APA citation: Q&A: Why social and emotional learning is so important for kids right now (2020, November 9) retrieved 8 March 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-qa-social-emotional-important-kids.html>

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