

Social and Emotional Learning in Virtual, In Person, and Physically Distanced Learning Environments

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Feelings of sadness, frustration, grief, and anxiety are common, as many are feeling isolated and uncertain about what the future may hold.

Students who are experiencing a shared, potentially traumatic experience, such as this pandemic, are finding many of their typical support systems limited during this time. Developing and maintaining skills to cope, build and maintain relationships, and manage ourselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, and social distancing safety measures have disrupted our daily routines, understandably creating social and emotional challenges for students, families, and educators. Uncertain environment are more important than ever. As school staff plan for the new school year, and a return to a new learning environment, whether its virtual, in-person, or physically distanced, making social and emotional learning (SEL) a priority to the online learning environment is crucial.

Social and emotional learning is a process by which we learn self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Like almost all learning, this is a two-part process: 1) the acquisition of skills; and 2) the application of those skills. A strong approach to SEL requires that both components be part of the learning environment, whether that learning takes place virtually or in person.

Direct Instructional Practices

Skill Acquisition in Virtual, In Person, and Physically Distanced Learning Environments

Skill acquisition is most often associated with an evidence-based SEL curriculum, but it really results from any direct instruction of SEL skills (e.g., communication, collaboration, and managing emotions). Educators are essential in such skill development, as they are in a position to teach these skills through academic instruction. Teaching students to recognize emotions through literature, asking students to practice coping skills during a challenging assignment or activity, or asking students to self-reflect after completing a project are just some examples of how this can be done.

Direct instruction of SEL skills can also occur through the use of an evidence-based curriculum. Many of these curriculums can be adapted for a virtual or physically distanced environment and can provide teachers with activities and lessons to support skill development. Considering ways in which all students can participate, both virtually and in person, will be important to maintaining classroom relationships and connections and can re-establish classroom norms.

It is realistic to expect that many SEL skills that students may have mastered before the school

closures and the pandemic, are no longer reliably and consistently used. It may be necessary to re-assess the skills students are most in need of now. Using the [Wisconsin SEL Competencies Pre/K-Adult](#) can help educators narrow the focus of their direct instruction of SEL skills. School teams may prioritize specific competencies to explicitly teach now. This allows teachers and school teams to dive deeply into teaching and integrating an SEL skill into instruction and day-to-day activities and procedures.

Guiding Questions

1. Is student SEL an identified priority?
2. Is supporting adult SEL a priority?
3. Do all staff know what SEL is, and do they have the resources to teach and integrate SEL skills into their virtual curriculum?
4. Does the existing SEL curriculum currently offered provide resources for implementation in a virtual environment?
5. Have staff identified ways to include virtual students with in-person students during SEL lessons and activities?
6. Are staff prepared to help students manage the strong emotions they may be feeling?
7. Are staff prepared to assist students in developing and maintaining social connections with adults and peers?
8. Are staff prepared to manage their own emotions, and do they know where they can get support?
9. Do staff have opportunities for connection and support with peers and co-workers?
10. Have staff identified SEL skills most in need of direct instruction and developed a plan to explicitly teach them to students both in person and virtually?
11. Have staff coordinated SEL instruction and resources with out-of-school time programs that are providing virtual and other supports to students?

Resources

- [Introduction to SEL Training for school staff](#)
- [Integrating SEL with Academic Instruction webinar](#)
- [Grade-Band Specific Book Lists](#)
- [SEL Providers Council-Free Covid 19 E-Learning Resources](#)
- [Journaling prompts to support SEL](#)

Creating Safe and Supportive Virtual Learning Environments through Trauma-Informed SEL

Creating a virtual learning space that feels safe, supportive, and inviting is a key component of supporting students' social and emotional wellbeing. [Trauma-sensitive social and emotional learning](#) is a way to create such an environment for all students and especially those who have experienced traumatic events. While all students will process and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways, all have been impacted by the school closures, and the fear that accompanies an unusual and unprecedented event.

Due to school closures and fears surrounding the pandemic, students may engage in behaviors such as acting out, being irrational to requests, or acting irritable and angry. All are natural responses to grief and anxiety. Creating online learning environments that are predictable will go a long way in creating welcoming and effective learning environments. In fact, many evidence-based SEL curricula have created [resources to support SEL instruction in a virtual setting](#) and are providing them free of cost.

Continuing an existing SEL curriculum, when possible, can provide stability and consistency for students struggling during this pandemic. Youth need the “safety” of structure, yet also need opportunities to explore, experiment and learn by making mistakes. Ensuring that staff respond consistently and restoratively to inappropriate behavior or mistakes, and teach and follow procedures and routines, can foster a sense of trust between students and adults. This approach will prioritize building and maintaining relationships with students and families, as well as support connections among and between student groups. For example, educators can use the [3 SEL Signature Practices](#) during each lesson (welcoming ritual, engaging activities, and optimistic closure) or [Morning Meetings](#) to foster a sense of predictability and build supportive relationships.

Developing and maintaining supportive relationships with students is one of the most impactful strategies available to educators. While it can be challenging to do this in a virtual environment, it is no less important. Note that students may be struggling to stay connected with one another during the period limited to virtual learning or they may grapple with social interactions as they transition to face-to-face groups. They may even be uncertain about the norms for interacting, as they appear to be changing frequently. Focusing on staying connected to students, and helping them stay connected to one another, in ever-changing environments, is vitally important. This [Relationship Mapping Tool](#) may be helpful to ensure that everyone has a strong connection to someone.

Offering choices to students when possible may also help mitigate a sense of losing control. Staff should consider ways to intentionally provide students with opportunities to express opinions and ideas, work cooperatively with and mentor each other, make genuine choices, and take on leadership roles, just as they normally would with in-person learning. Purposefully fostering a sense of agentic engagement will also help play a role in the successful transition from virtual to in-person learning, when the opportunity arises.

Creating safe and supportive learning environments for students is not enough to promote trauma-informed SEL. The adults working with students may be struggling as well, as stress likewise impacts the ability of adults to bring their best SEL self to the learning environment. An equal focus on promoting and supporting SEL in adults, then, is critical in developing and maintaining a successful virtual learning environment. For example, providing support to address adult compassion fatigue, such as the [Compassion Resilience Toolkit](#), helps educators to build their own SEL skills. The use of the [3 Signature Practices](#) and [Morning Meetings](#) in staff interactions can help to create and maintain a safe and supportive environment for adults as well.

Guiding Questions

1. Have you considered your policies and practices and how they each promote the five trauma sensitive school values: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment?
2. Have you determined what tools and technologies you can use to stay connected to students that go beyond content instruction?
3. Have you discussed virtual procedures and routines that can help create a consistent environment?
4. Have you discussed discipline approaches that are supportive and restorative, rather than punitive?

5. Have you considered how you are providing an inclusive, culturally responsive learning environment conducive to SEL acquisition?
6. Are staff integrating SEL skills into learning activities to give students practical application of the skills they know?
7. Have you considered how you can help students maintain connections between one another, including students who are in school and those who are attending virtually?
8. Are you providing opportunities for students to make meaningful choices in their learning and interactions?
9. Are you cuing students to practice SEL skills, such as self-regulation, coping, and self-reflection?
10. Do you have a plan to stay connected to parents, guardians, and families?
11. Have you set realistic expectations of parents, guardians, and families and their role in supporting virtual instruction?
12. Can you provide SEL activities that families can do together?

Resources

- [3 Signature Practices](#)
- [Morning Meetings Online-Edutopia](#)
- [Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit](#)
- [DPI TSS Online Learning Series](#)
- [Meditation Apps for kids](#) Common Sense Media

General SEL Resources To Support SEL in the Virtual Classroom

- [Casel Cares-Covid 19 Resources](#)
- [Facing History and Ourselves-Resources for teaching online](#)
- [Search Institute-Building Developmental Relationships During Covid](#)
- [Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening Schools](#) CASEL

SEL Resources For Families

- [Create a Family Charter-Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#)
- [DPI SEL Resources for parents and guardians](#)
- [PBS Kids Daily](#)
- [American Institutes for Research-Creating Safe and Supportive Learning Environments at Home-PodCast with Dr. David Osher](#)