



Social and emotional learning



Supporting children's social and emotional development

Babies are born communicators and are capable of experiencing and expressing a wide range of emotions. Through their many positive interactions with caregivers, they learn to feel good about themselves and to enjoy relating with others. They also learn how to manage a range of feelings and to communicate effectively to get their needs met.

As babies grow into toddlers and later preschoolers, they can manage more things by themselves but still need guidance and support from their caregivers. Toddlers want to please adults and also to be themselves. They do this by imitating others and build their self confidence by 'helping' during everyday experiences such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping. They also adapt their behaviour according to their caregivers' responses and are learning ways to cope with conflict and to solve problems through their relationships with significant adults in their lives.

Preschoolers develop their social and emotional skills through a wide network of social relationships including other adults and children. Supported by their increased language, thinking and planning capabilities, preschoolers are more able to wait for things they want, to negotiate solutions to everyday problems and make decisions for themselves and with others.

Children's social and emotional skills are developing all the time. Skills may develop differently for different children. Children benefit from having many learning and practise opportunities.

There are many facets to social and emotional learning, which are summarised in the infographic below.

Click on an element below to learn more.



Social and emotional development in the early years

Birth to school age is the period of greatest growth and development. The early childhood years are not only a time for taking first steps or for saying first words. They are also when, through their relationships with others, children are building expectations about their world and the people in it and are developing their first:

- sense of self including feeling good about themselves and what they can do
- social skills to get along in life with others
- emotional skills such as recognising, expressing and managing a wide range of feelings.

These first skills are very important as they form the foundations for children's ongoing development and affect their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

Why social and emotional learning (SEL) is part of KidsMatter Primary

Social and emotional learning is about learning how to manage feelings, manage friendships and solve problems. These are essential life skills that support wellbeing and positive mental health. Social and emotional skills promote children's ability to cope with difficulties and help to prevent mental health problems. Children who have developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.

KidsMatter emphasises teaching social and emotional learning as a way of promoting children's mental health. Social and emotional learning provides practical skills that all children can learn and apply to everyday situations. Learning skills such as self-awareness, effective communication and conflict resolution can also help to prevent the development of mental health difficulties in children who might otherwise be vulnerable. In this way teaching children social and emotional skills helps to promote resilience – the capacity to cope and stay healthy in spite of the negative things that happen through life.

What does social and emotional learning have to do with learning?

Research has shown that children's learning is influenced by a range of social and emotional factors. How well children do at school is affected by things such as:

- how confident children feel about their abilities
- how effectively they are able to manage their own behaviour
- how well they can concentrate and organise themselves
- how effectively they can solve problems
- how positively they are able to get on with teaching staff and with peers
- how effectively they take into account others' needs
- how well they can understand and accept responsibilities.

How social and emotional learning is taught

A number of programs for school-based teaching of social and emotional skills have been developed in Australia and internationally. For the implementation of KidsMatter Primary, schools select the program (or programs) that best suit their particular needs. Social and emotional learning programs that have been shown through research to improve children's social and emotional competence are more likely to achieve goals related to improving students' mental health. KidsMatter Primary provides schools with detailed information about programs and the research evidence for their effectiveness.

School-wide classroom teaching of social and emotional learning allows staff and students to share a common understanding of what it is all about. Importantly, the emphasis of its teaching needs to be not just on learning about emotions and relationships, but on practical skills that children can apply across a range of situations at school, at home and in the broader community. Classroom teaching which is offered regularly will maximise the

benefits. Opportunities for learning can be coordinated across the school so that children can continue to develop their skills with age and experience.

Children learn social and emotional skills most effectively when they are also reinforced at home. Many social and emotional learning programs include components for involving the family and community in promoting the teaching. This gives parents and carers the chance to learn about the particular approach schools take and what they can do to support children's social and emotional learning. In this way, school-based social and emotional learning offers gains all round – for students, for schools and for families.

The social and emotional learning framework

Many teaching staff and schools already incorporate some aspects of social and emotional learning. The KidsMatter Primary approach looks at what schools are already doing and asks them to evaluate how systematically and effectively they are teaching social and emotional skills. It provides them with a framework for planning, teaching and evaluating to help ensure that from year to year children can build social and emotional skills that are relevant and appropriate for their age and skill level.

The KidsMatter approach to social and emotional learning is based on the model developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an internationally-recognised lead organisation for this area of research. The diagram outlines the five core competencies that CASEL has identified as central to social and emotional learning.



1 Adapted from *The Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2006). Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide. Chicago, IL: Author*

These five social and emotional skill areas are viewed as essential for the development of good mental health. Structured teaching of these competencies, and opportunities for students to practise and generalise them in the classroom, school and wider community, are also crucial to implementing effective social and emotional learning. KidsMatter Primary encourages schools to communicate with families about their work in teaching and promoting children's social and emotional learning. Informing and working with families on the development of children's competencies has been found to increase the benefits for children.

Why social and emotional learning is important to schools

Australia's national educational goals for the 21st century, as well as curriculum frameworks for each state and territory, recognise the importance of children achieving positive outcomes that relate directly to the skills of social and emotional learning. In addition, there is broad agreement and research evidence that shows that social and emotional skills can improve academic learning and enhance students' motivation to cooperate and achieve.

Because it emphasises teaching children the skills for positive relationships, social and emotional learning is a key strategy for schools in their efforts to reduce bullying and improve caring, respect and responsibility at school. When children are taught specific strategies for recognising and responding to emotions, thinking through challenging situations and communicating effectively, they are less likely to act out frustrations at school and elsewhere.

Social and emotional skills at home

For children to develop social and emotional skills they need guidance that is matched to their level of development, as well as practice. In addition to teaching social and emotional learning at school, parents and carers can encourage children to use these skills in everyday interactions at home. Prompting and encouraging children to apply their learning in this way helps them develop their skills. Here we provide two examples that show how everyday situations can be used as opportunities for supporting children's social and emotional skills development.

In the first example, Voula is very excited about a family outing, but her behaviour is very annoying to the rest of her family, especially to her baby brother. The following table considers the problem, the skills Voula needs to learn, and how a parent or carer might support her learning.

Skill	The problem	Needs to learn	How to support
Self-awareness	Doesn't recognise she is wound up.	To recognise she is feeling excited and how it affects her.	Name it: "You seem pretty excited. You might tire yourself out using up all that energy before we even get there!"
Social awareness	Doesn't take account of others' needs.	To understand how others have different feelings and needs from hers.	Ask/explain: "See how the baby is getting upset? He wants you to stop poking him."
Self-management	Doesn't know how to contain her excitement.	To be able to be excited without annoying others.	Redirect: "Let's see if you can use that energy to help us get ready."

In the next example, Wendy, who is 10 years old, is angry because her young preschooler sister, Meg, has scribbled all over the homework she had left on the kitchen table. Wendy is angry with Meg and angry with her mother for allowing this to happen.

By looking at the ways that Wendy could use social and emotional skills, we can see how she could be supported to solve this problem and further her skills for effectively managing other similar problems in the future.

Skill	Needs to learn	How to support
Self-awareness	To recognise that she is angry and remember that she can work this out calmly.	Show you understand: “I can understand why you would feel angry.” Prompt: “Let’s think this through.”
Social awareness	To understand her sister’s point of view: as a preschooler she thinks the homework is just paper to draw on.	Encourage perspective-taking: “Meg didn’t realise it was important. I don’t think she did it on purpose – do you?”
Self-management	To use strategies that help her to calm down.	Show and encourage: “We can sort this out better when we do it calmly.”
Responsible decision-making	To not leave homework lying around.	Ask: “What do you need to do to fix it this time? What can you do next time so it won’t happen again?”
Relationship skills	To be able to discuss the issue with a parent or carer and to explain her feelings to Meg in a calm way.	Show and praise: “How about telling Meg that you’re unhappy and that you don’t want her to draw on your things again?”; “Thanks for working it out calmly. I’m impressed with the way you’ve handled it.”

It’s important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children.

Keys to supporting social and emotional skills development

It’s important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children. Parents and carers and schools working together to help children develop social and emotional skills can really make a positive difference for children’s mental health.

Key points

- Get involved – find out about the social and emotional learning program your child’s school is using. Learn the language and basics and look for opportunities to apply them at home.
- Talk about feelings – help children explore theirs.
- Be a model – use the skills yourself and show children how they work. Parents and carers don’t have to be perfect; showing them you can make a mistake and learn from it can be really helpful too.

- Be a guide – turn difficulties into learning opportunities.
- Acknowledge and appreciate – provide explicit feedback and praise.

See also:

[Social and emotional learning: Suggestions for families](#)