Introduction and background

This guidance report from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) outlines the benefits of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and offers 6 evidence-based recommendations for schools. The report is accompanied by a table which lists, defines and exemplifies the 5 core competencies of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making). The EEF has also created an audit and discussion tool for schools.

Key points

The benefits of social and emotional skills

- There is extensive evidence associating childhood social and emotional skills with improved outcomes at school and in later life.
- For example, longitudinal research in the UK has shown that good social and emotional skills—including self-regulation, self-awareness, and social skills—developed by the age of 10, are predictors of a range of adult outcomes (age 42), such as life satisfaction, labour market success, and good overall health.
- Numerous large evidence reviews have demonstrated that well-implemented SEL programmes in school have a positive impact in a range of areas including academic achievement, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and a decrease in bullying.
- The promotion of SEL skills may be particularly important for disadvantaged pupils who tend, at all ages, to have weaker SEL skills than their better-off peers.
- There is also evidence that the benefits of SEL have an impact on teachers, leading to lower stress levels and higher levels of job satisfaction.
- Social and emotional skills are protective factors for mental health. They give children the tools to address mental health challenges which interfere with life, such as regulating emotions, concentrating and interacting with peers.
- A survey of over 400 primary schools conducted by the University of Manchester found that teachers have very positive attitudes towards SEL. Forty-six per cent of schools said that SEL was their top priority and 49 per cent believe that it is important alongside a list of other priorities. Fifty-one per cent of schools have regular timetabled slots for SEL. Time was the biggest barrier to delivering SEL (cited by 71% of schools). When asked what would help them to deliver SEL more effectively, schools identified training as the greatest need, followed by resources and links.

Teach SEL skills explicitly

- The strategies outlined within this recommendation are linked to the 5 core competencies (see introduction).
- Teachers can develop self-awareness in children by helping them to label and recognise emotions through specific vocabulary training. For example, mirrors, photographs and pictures can be used to discuss what happens to people’s faces and bodies when they are experiencing particular emotions. Teachers could also use miming activities, asking children to guess which emotion is being portrayed.
- The creation of a ‘feelings display’ in the form of a tree or a wheel will give children opportunities to expand their vocabulary in relation to feelings. This can be accompanied by discussion, i.e. the teacher might say: “You feel happy? Is there another word on our feelings tree which you could use?” Teachers might also refer to their own feelings: ‘This is beginning to make me frustrated because you’re talking while I’m trying to explain something important to you’.
- There are a number of activities which can help children to self-regulate. These include calling strategies such as breathing; the use of images, such as watching a balloon being blown up till it bursts; or brainstorming ways to deal with strong emotions.
- Social awareness could be developed by ‘hot seating’ where one child plays a character and the rest of the class asks them questions about their feelings and how these feelings influence the choices which they make. Literature, poetry and real-life accounts can be used to help children understand what it is like to feel lonely or bullied. Teachers should encourage self-reflection, e.g. what would I have done in this situation?
- Strategies to develop relationship skills can be developed through brainstorming and modelling of good communication techniques, role-play scenarios (e.g. a pupil trying to join in with a game in the playground) or modelling of poor communication techniques by the teacher followed by discussion.

Integrate and model SEL skills through everyday teaching

- The teaching of SEL skills will have greater and longer-term impacts when it is integrated into everyday classroom interactions and across subjects.
- Teachers might, for example, encourage a class to discuss ongoing problems which are affecting the whole group, such as someone being ignored. Teachers can also give specific focussed praise for children who are applying SEL learning. This may be supplemented by recognition or rewards for positive behaviour.
The full document can be downloaded from:

©Document Summary Service 2019. University of Bristol, School of Education, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol, BS8 1JA.