

Improving Social and Emotional Learning in primary schools

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 to 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.

- Teachers should avoid relying on ‘crisis moments’ such as when there is a case of bullying, to discuss SEL. If SEL is only discussed in such contexts there is a risk that pupils will perceive it as being solely about poor behaviour.
- There are a number of ways in which SEL can be embedded across the curriculum. In history, children can develop an understanding of others’ feelings based on real events. They could, for example, imagine themselves as evacuees in World War 2. In PE, they might look at the features of effective teamwork or discuss how it feels to lose a game and respond constructively. In drama, role play can enable children to practise emotional expression. In English, a teacher may read a story through twice, asking questions during the second reading to increase pupils’ emotional vocabulary, such as ‘Can you use words from the story to explain how you feel when...?’
- Structured whole class discussion provides many opportunities for pupils to practise emotional skills. Teachers should provide ground rules for talk. They may, for example, ask pupils to reference a classmate’s name and contribution in their response. This encourages active listening and builds a cumulative response.
- Time spent on SEL should be focussed. SEL lessons should run for a year with embedding, repetition and increasing challenge in subsequent year groups.
- SEL programmes with stronger evidence usually involve around one hour a week. There is evidence that shorter regular sessions are more effective than infrequent longer sessions.
- Some evaluations have found that teacher preparedness and enthusiasm matter more to outcomes than the number of lessons delivered.
- Schools need to be clear about which skills they are setting out to develop and these skills should be made explicit; it is important that pupils understand which skills they are being expected to learn.

Reinforce SEL skills through whole-school ethos and activities

- Schoolwide norms which are simply on a poster will not create a positive school environment. Teachers and pupils must be committed to them. In order for this to happen, they must be developed collaboratively with staff, parents and pupils. They can then be embedded into school wide systems for recognition and reward.
- Changes to the school environment can help to embed SEL: examples include a ‘worry box’ in which pupils can post any worries they have and ask for help; or providing areas in the playground where pupils can go to calm down.
- School routines such as assemblies or regular circle time can give pupils regular opportunities to practise SEL skills and build a sense of community.
- Schools should align their behaviour and anti-bullying policies to their work on SEL. This could include helping children to understand the impact of their behaviour and developing shared rules based on mutual respect. Anti-bullying policies can be aligned with SEL through sessions focussed on empathy and perspective-taking or considering the role of bystanders in cases of bullying.
- Schools must engage with families to ensure that SEL learning is being reinforced at home. Strategies used to engage parents could include; involvement in drafting the school norms; inviting parents to participate in SEL learning sessions; or including discussion of children’s social and emotional development at parents’ evenings.

Plan carefully for adopting a SEL programme

- Not all SEL programmes are effective, so care needs to be taken by schools in selecting and implementing an appropriate approach within their context.
- Although buying in a ready-made programme may not be the best solution for all schools, it offers a number of benefits. Seven large evidence reviews show that these programmes have a number of positive impacts on outcomes, including social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic achievement. For an overview of evidence-based programmes, schools can refer to the EEF’s Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook.
- Some schools will wish to construct their own programme which is tailored to their context. When doing so, they should ensure even coverage of the 5 core competencies. They will need to balance the potential limitations (time taken to create a programme and lack of evidence) against the benefits of increased flexibility and tailoring.
- Although there is evidence of the impact of SEL programmes overall, the impact of individual programme varies substantially. This points to a need for careful planning and implementation with ongoing review. Schools should ask themselves whether they can commit the time required to implement the programme as intended. The EEF guide *Putting evidence to work – a schools’ guide to implementation* is a useful document to consult.

Using a SAFE (sequential, active, focused and explicit) curriculum.

- In an analysis of 213 SEL programmes, those which followed 4 key principles were found to have a greater impact on children’s outcomes.
- It is important to have activities which break down new knowledge into smaller steps and enable pupils to master them sequentially. This can be achieved in part through a ‘spiral curriculum’ which revisits common concepts in age-appropriate ways so that they are embedded. For example, children in reception may be able to identify and express basic emotions. By the time they are in Year 6, they will be able to identify and predict a wide range of emotions and also understand and express mixed feelings.
- Evidence on SEL shows that, along with teacher-led activities, it is particularly active forms of learning such as games, simulations and small group work which have been associated with greater impacts.

Plan, support and monitor implementation

- Where school leaders are perceived to be supportive of SEL initiatives, teachers feel better equipped to deliver it in class. Therefore, the first priority for leaders is to develop a shared SEL vision for the school which fosters commitment across the whole school.
- Leaders should establish a team which shares leadership responsibility for SEL and review school policies to ensure that they are compatible with the vision. They should also review the curriculum with a view to creating more SEL opportunities.
- There should be time and space for all staff to engage in SEL planning and implementation.
- Leaders should involve parents and the community in what pupils are learning in SEL.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/SEL/EEF_Social_and_Emotional_Learning.pdf