

SEL IN YOUR CLASSROOM: 7 SIMPLE TIPS

Easy techniques for incorporating social emotional learning into your curriculum

Teaching students social-emotional skills like decision-making, collaboration, communication, and confidence helps them succeed in countless everyday scenarios. Social-emotional learning (SEL) helps them grow into healthy, happy, thoughtful adults with strong relationships and rewarding careers, which is what we all want for our future generations.

Instead of trying to squeeze in another lesson, book, or exercise, why not try building SEL into your classroom's everyday routine? Here are some helpful ideas for easily promoting social-emotional learning within your curriculum.



1. MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness practice helps students stay aware of their own thoughts and feelings, leading to a happier and healthier classroom, while also improving academic performance and social-emotional intelligence.

- Try practicing **mindful breathing** by asking students to place the hands on the belly, feeling the gentle rise and fall of breath. Have them count to three as they inhale, then count to three again as they exhale. You can use this simple breath-awareness technique throughout the day to ease transitions or challenging situations.
- **Isolating sensory experiences bring increased focus.** Try creating smelling jars using ingredients like cinnamon, popcorn, or flowers (just remember to be aware of student allergies and scent sensitivities). Have students try to guess what's inside each jar without looking!
- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Activities** can be useful. Ask students to identify: 5 things they can see, 4 things they can feel, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell, 1 thing they can taste.
- **Calming activities like guided imagery also help develop imagination.** Ask students to close their eyes while you lead them through a pretend journey. You can choose a topic that relates to something you're studying. For example, if you're doing a unit on the ocean, have students imagine they're scuba diving through deep undersea waters, looking for beautiful fish and colorful plants. Close out the guided activity by having them take a few deep breaths and open their eyes.

2. EMPATHY

Encourage students to listen to others and make an effort to understand their feelings. Model this behavior yourself! Take advantage of every opportunity to have kids practice empathy throughout the school day.

- Take the time to teach your classroom **vocabulary about feelings and emotions**. Making sure your students have the vocabulary to express themselves means they have better tools for empathizing and communicating with others.
- When you're reading a book, have the class sit in a circle or break into small groups, then **allow students to discuss the ways they empathize with a certain character's situation, personality, problem, or victory**. Ask questions like, "How would you feel if you were this character?" or "Has this situation ever happened to you and how did you respond?"
- Have fun **drawing Venn diagrams** that relate to cultural similarities and differences, so students can expand their insight into other people's worldviews and experiences.

Try broaching the subject of bullying as a class by reading a social-emotional themed book. Here are some ideas to get you started!

- [*Bullying Hurts Everyone*](#)
- [*Standing up to the Bullies*](#)

3. GRATITUDE

Expressing gratitude results in lowered stress, better health, and more energy. Train yourself and your students to express gratitude frequently!

- **Try simple exercises with each lesson**, like asking students to share what they enjoyed and what interested them most.
- **Talk about gratitude-related ideas** and teach gratitude-related vocabulary.
- **Help settle differences by asking students who disagree to point out the other student's positive qualities and express gratitude for them**. Another activity can involve the whole class: everyone writes down positive messages about each fellow student, then everything is shared with the teacher, who compiles them into a book to give to each student.
- **Start or end the day on a positive note with high-fives**: either literal high-fives as they walk into class, or figurative high-fives where students give each other compliments or share something that went well that day.



4. COOPERATION

Give students plenty of opportunities to work with others. Working with a partner or in a group helps kids practice cooperation and builds community in the classroom.

- **Leadership, negotiation, and productivity are just some of the social-emotional skills** built in group settings. Be sure to recognize these positive traits when you see them displayed in class.
- **Assign roles within groups**, along with an explanation of what each role entails, helping to establish guidelines for effective cooperation.
- **Try going back and forth between allowing students to choose their own groups and strategically assigning their partnerships yourself.** Discuss the importance of each function or role played in successfully completing an activity. Lessons in cooperation are closely linked to self-awareness.



5. CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Because responsible decision-making and goal-setting is an important component of SEL, try allowing students to make choices in class. A school's structure typically restricts student choice, so even small decisions can be extremely meaningful as learning tools, empowering students to learn responsibility and cultivate autonomy in positive ways.

- Offer students the choice of what to read, or allow them to **choose from a “menu of options”** for tasks or assignments.
- **Look at the calendar as a class**, and allow your students to choose a manageable deadline.
- **Consider a flexible seating arrangement for your classroom.** Not all students are neurologically wired the same. By allowing them the option to sit on inflatable balls, stools, bean bags, or something else, you're giving them the chance to self-regulate while also promoting responsibility and self-control.
- **Lists of pros and cons** can be a fun way to teach kids how to weigh options and make well-informed decisions. Choose fun topics and make decisions as a class.

6. COMMUNICATION

Provide plenty of opportunities for kids to talk with each other throughout the course of the day. Bouncing ideas off each other and solving problems through communication will build confidence and community.

- When the class is getting antsy, **take a quick break to chat with friends and neighbors!** Talking for a few minutes will help everyone be ready to focus when you get back on track.
- **Encourage discussion**, healthy debate, and multiple points of view while emphasizing good listening skills. If some students are dominating the discussion or belittling another's point of view, step in and make it clear that everyone's perspective is valid.
- **“Turn and Talk”** (quick collaborative learning chats) answering a guided question on a subject or book can be a great way to encourage healthy communication.
- Writing is a way of talking with oneself! **Schedule journaling and free-writing time**, with quiet music and dimmed lighting. Writing time can be a peaceful, soothing break your students look forward to.

7. SELF-AWARENESS

When students are self-aware, they're able to think about their actions and decisions, and they can manage their emotions and make positive plans.

- Encourage **expression** through art. Sometimes students think or feel things that can't be put into words. Art is a wonderful tool for exploring self-awareness. Ask students to sketch thoughts or feelings, or paint their response to a piece of poetry or music.
- Before and after completing an assignment, **allow students to reflect upon their work** and what they've learned, through writing or circle talk.
- At the end of the day, **ask your students to think about how they feel**, talk about events from the day, set goals for tomorrow, or share anything they've learned.



Reading aloud is a great tool for exploring SEL with the whole class. Look for books with complex themes to encourage the exploration of social-emotional concepts. You can focus on the characters in works of fiction, or you can address SEL directly by reading books that touch on social-emotional issues.

Don't forget to model healthy social-emotional skills with your own behavior. Students learn from watching adults and role models, including you! Practice positive skills like honesty, kindness, integrity, and empathy, along with healthy anger management. When students see you modeling positive relationships and healthy interactions, they'll emulate your behavior in their own!

Well Done!

