



SEL Helps Valued Outcomes to Happen: A Series of Examples...

How Parents Can Address Their Children’s Social-Emotional Needs in Stressful Times

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Try as we might, we cannot shield children from the negative events in the world, events that weigh on their sense of wellbeing. This calls on adults – especially parents and grandparents – to open up conversations with children that ultimately will leave them better equipped to cope with challenges in their lives and to feel capable of advocating for justice in their schools, communities, and the world.

What skills do you feel it’s most important for your children to learn before they graduate high school?

What character virtues would you most like to have attributed to your children upon their graduation from high school?

Take some time to think about your answers. It turns out that these skills and character virtues will predict your children’s future life course as much as anything else... including their academic success.

And your answers will reflect your priorities when it comes to your children’s social-emotional and character development. This is an aspect of development that is as meaningful to your children’s schools as it is to you. Consider this for a moment:

When I speak to parents, I often ask “How many of you want children, your own children, or children in your community, to be knowledgeable?” Nearly everybody raises their hands. Next, I ask, “How many of you would like them to be responsible?” Same response. “How about non-violent? How about drug-free? How about caring?” Almost all hands go up.

I then say, “Nowadays, the curriculum in schools is very crowded. You can’t include all those areas. Between knowledgeable, responsible, non-violent, drug-free and caring, which one do you want to drop?” Most parents have a hard time with this question. Think about your own answer. When I press parents to make a choice, most are most concerned about the social-emotional safety and character of their children. Of course, we don’t want to neglect any of these areas. We want our children to be responsible, caring, non-violent, drug-free, AND knowledgeable. It does not take a lot of imagination to think about what happens when you have knowledgeable, non-caring and irresponsible people running our organizations, communities, and governments. When you check out the news, the consequences are there for all to see.

What Parents Can Do

Respond To What Our Children Need...

In our homes, we can make it a priority, especially during these stressful times, to attend to the emotional needs of our children. Here is what they would tell you they need most:

- Please truly listen to me without being distracted.
- Please let me contribute to the household. I want to help, even in small ways. Don’t give in to me if I resist or mess up initially—I really do want to help.
- Please be reassuring to me about the future. I want to be optimistic.
- Please be kind to me and expect me to be kind to other members of the family—even my siblings.

- Please remember that I have a lot of strong emotions and I am still learning to handle them. I will need to have things repeated to me patiently and caringly, even though I should have heard them before.
- Please help me stay focused on my future potential so I will want to stay healthy, drug-free, and not hurt others.
- Please let some silliness into the household, since we know that humor is helpful for creativity and biologically incompatible with stress.
- Please make sure we all have moments for mindfulness, for reflection, for chilling out, to help us all reduce our stress.

Four Sets of Ideas and Practices for Emotionally Intelligent Parenting

1. *Caring Relationships Matter Most:* Be Understanding, Creative, Flexible, and Forgiving- of yourself and your family members and friends. Everyone is suffering directly and indirectly from the impact of COVID. Very few of us are at our best, certainly not all the time.
2. *Focus on Feelings– Yours and Children’s:* Remember, children only know the feelings you show. They don’t know how proud you are of them, how much you love them, and how worried you are about them, unless you show it or say it. In these stressful times, it’s not unusual to show our patience, our annoyance, even our disappointment--- so at least make up with it by showing them the positives. Show appreciation for even the very small and expected things that children do (e.g., straightening their rooms, brushing teeth, or doing homework without nagging). And above all, when you lose your cool, which we all do, apologize for how you handled the situation and clarify what happened, why you reacted as you did, and what the consequences will be, now that you have calmed down. Your children will never tell you this, but they will be highly grateful to you for doing so. And they will carry around a lot less stress, guilt, and anger.
3. *Be Organized and Involve Everyone:* Routines matter- for mealtimes, bedtimes, starting the day, coming home after school, etc. Having routines reduces stress from uncertainty. Have family meetings periodically to review your routines. Relatedly, don’t hesitate to set limits for your kids, especially around social media use and online gaming. They need your guidance more than they need “slack.” You are teaching them better decision making and responsibility. Speaking of the latter, be sure to find ways for your children, aged preschool and up, to help with household routines, look after themselves, and in other ways to be contributors. Feeling valued and involved in your own house (and of course, in your school and classroom) is a powerful pillar of good mental health and a good way to help them learn more about, and exercise, their strengths.
4. *Make Your Home an Oasis Against Stress Through Humor:* This may sound inappropriate, perhaps, but despite the serious events in the world and even the tragedies that have struck many families, we must find time to laugh or smile together! Finding games to play, programs to watch, or online or live museums or concerts to visit together is like taking a powerful vitamin. Humor and occasional silliness are additional pillars of positive mental health.

The cliché, “it takes a village to raise a child,” aligns with the best scientific research and common sense. But the first and most powerful influence on children’s social-emotional and character development is the home. Families pave the way for all children to be knowledgeable, responsible, non-violent, drug-free, and caring. Schools, out-of-school programs, and community organizations then pick up the baton. These kinds of partnerships are more within our grasp than we might realize if we put in the work. Our children and grandchildren deserve no less.

This information sheet was provided by SEL4NJ, the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance of NJ, a voluntary, grass-roots organization working with schools and communities to promote social-emotional and character development and supportive, engaging, inclusive, equitable classroom and school environments for learning. Prepared by Maurice Elias, SEL4NJ Trustee and Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org.