



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

Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.” The Center for Disease Control released a post-pandemic report indicating that youth in the U.S. are facing concerning levels of distress, sadness, and hopelessness, particularly for teen girls and teens identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ+). It is well documented that many youths who are in need do not receive supports and there are disparities in access to school-based mental health supports (NASP).

This brief defines the relationship of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and mental health. SEL is one effective way of promoting positive mental health in children and adolescents. SEL promotes responsive relationships, emotionally safe environments, and skills development – important “protective factors” which serve as a buffer against mental health risks. SEL is an indispensable part of student mental health and wellness. It helps to improve attitudes students have about themselves and others, while decreasing emotional distress and risky behaviors. SEL should be implemented as part of a multitiered system of mental wellness supports and resources that include wellness promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) cites numerous benefits for children to have good mental health:

Mentally healthy children are more successful in school and life. Good mental health is critical to children’s success in school and life. Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also encompasses wellness promotion; social, emotional, and behavioral health; and the ability to cope with life’s challenges. Mental and behavioral health problems not only affect students’ short-term classroom engagement, but also interfere with long-term development of positive relationships and work-related skills.

Comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services support the mission and purpose of schools which is learning. All services provided in schools should be appropriate to the learning environment; those that are not take the risk being ineffective or even counterproductive. School psychologists, and other mental health professionals, such as school social workers and school counselors, have specialized training in child development, mental health, learning, diversity, culturally responsive services, and school systems and law. Their unique expertise lies in how these elements interact to shape children’s behavior, learning, and overall adjustment.

Schools are an ideal place to provide mental and behavioral health services to children and youth.

Schools provide an ideal context for prevention, intervention, positive development, and regular communication between school and families. Students are more likely to seek counseling when services are available in schools. Comprehensive, culturally responsive school mental health services can help address inequities in access and help reduce the stigma associated with receiving mental health services by making it part of the fabric of the school system.

Comprehensive school mental health services are essential to creating and sustaining safe schools.

A caring, supportive, kind, and inclusive school is a safe school. These schools are less likely to see harassment, intimidation, bullying, and violence. School mental health professionals play an important role as part of teams dedicated to creating a positive school culture and climate. When incidents occur, prompt access to mental health services in schools is vital to restoring the physical and psychological safety of our students.

Social-emotional learning can be a valuable tool to promote mental health, as well as mitigate against mental and behavioral health difficulties that can negatively impact children and adolescents in school and at home. This happens in two ways: promoting essential life skills represented by the CASEL 5 SEL skills, and by employing SEL-derived strategies for creating environments conducive to positive mental health, particularly during difficulty. According to the Committee for Children:

“Positive social skills are protective factors for mental health. Teaching youth mindfulness, coping skills, communication skills, relaxation techniques, self-regulation, and emotion identification and management equips them with tools and resources to address mental health challenges that interfere with learning. Capitalizing on natural opportunities to promote social-emotional learning and mental health also plays an important role.

Safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments are critical components of this. Within such environments, comprehensive social-emotional learning instruction is imperative. Social skills instruction can help address many learning barriers through promoting positive development, which can also positively affect academic achievement. Research shows SEL is associated with a positive impact on important mental health variables that increase children’s attachment to school and motivation to learn and reduce risky behaviors.”

References:

- Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning: <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-your-priorities/sel-and-mental-health/>
- Committee for Children: <https://www.cfchildren.org/blog/2015/01/promoting-mental-health-through-sel/>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2021). *Comprehensive School-Based Mental and Behavioral Health Services and School Psychologists* [handout]. Author.

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 Sol B. Heckelman, Ph.D. and Barry Barbarasch, Ed.D., who are both members of SEL4NJ Advisory Council. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org