

## CORE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL and CIVIC COMPETENCIES

The following are the core social and emotional competencies that parents and educators can promote in the classrooms, and hallways of schools as well as homes. Although different longitudinal researchers have used somewhat different terms, the following listing of competencies represent an organization that leading psychosocial researchers and practitioners have endorsed (Fuchs-Nadeau, et. al., 2002). (Note: the competencies detailed below were the foundation for New York State's 'Interpersonal Violence Prevention Guidelines'.)

Each of these sections begins with a brief definition and overview of the competencies and guidelines that help children to learn these sets of skills, knowledge and beliefs. The section concludes with a series of examples and tips about teaching and learning each competency.

### ***1) Reflective and empathic abilities: Connecting with ourselves and others:***

Definition and overview: Learning to "connect" or listen to ourselves (reflective capacities) and others (empathic capacities) is the foundation for social-emotional competency (Cohen, 2001). This capacity involves learning to "listen" actively to verbal and non-verbal messages and to think about what they mean. It also means recognizing when we don't understand what another person is saying or what we are saying/feeling and thereby, honoring (rather than masking) our confusion. Listening to others and ourselves provides the social-emotional information we need to make decisions, solve conflicts non-violently, cooperate, communicate and form friendships.

Feeling connected to ourselves and others and experiencing self-awareness is an essential facet of creating safe schools for several reasons:

- People who are violent – be it physically, socially and/or emotionally -- are typically disconnected from themselves. Anger and rage typically grow out of frustration and loss. When children, as well as adults are disconnected with feelings of frustration and loss, they are more likely to act in violent ways.
- When a student is feeling aggressive and vulnerable to acting in violent ways, sensing that others are listening and wanting to understand how he or she is feeling in supportive ways reduces the likelihood that he or she will act violently.
- Students who feel connected to other students are more likely to express support and caring. This is the kind of social environment promotes safety and discourages violence as a solution to problems. It is also the type of social environment that allows and encourages students to confide in adults regarding a fellow student they may be concerned about.

Guidelines: There are a number of organizing guidelines that can enhance educators' and parents' ability to connect with children.

- Be curious about the child's experience.
- Ask questions to learn more about the child's experience.
- Listen, listen and listen.
- The use of the word "should": there are many moments when it is essential that we let children know what they should and should not do. When children are beginning to express

feelings – be it verbally, artistically or otherwise – it is often, inadvertently, unhelpful to tell them that they “should not feel” a certain way.

- Recognize and honor children’s experience. We do not need to always agree with and/or not always be pleased with what children say, but it is useful to recognize and honor their experiences.
- The power of an appreciative attitude: With few exceptions, children do the best they can. Even when a child misbehaves, this typically occurs because the child does not think he or she has any other options. An appreciative attitude can powerfully foster our ability to connect with others. Recognizing that children try to do their best enhances their ability to be open to adults’ suggestions and comments.
- Confusion and “not knowing”: Children have a common belief that it is unacceptable to be confused and/or not know the answer. Although this misunderstanding tends to become more prevalent as children move into middle and high school, it often begins in the first years of school life. As we detail in the next chapter on Emotional Safety, parents and educators have a series of ongoing opportunities to let children know it is normal to be confused and not know the answers. In fact, these are wonderful opportunities to learn something new if we allow ourselves to ask for help.
- When we have difficulty connecting with a child, it may be an important signal that something is amiss. Pay attention to feeling unable to connect. If you are concerned about not being able to connect with a child, confer with your school administrator, school counselor and/or other community members who have expertise in these areas.
- Allow children to express even their most angry feelings or most destructive fantasies. Help them to think about these images and ideas by projecting the possible future negative consequences for these actions.

*Examples/tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can support our capacity to connect with children and foster social emotional learning to prevent youth violence.*

- *Ask questions: “How would you feel if you were in that person’s shoes? How are you feeling right now?”*
- *Acknowledge: “We have a problem. What do you think our goal should be? What are the range of ways we can solve this problem?”*
- *Learn and listen: “What matters to you? “How can we learn more about that?”*
- *Tell stories about when you were a boy or girl as well as now: How did you learn these skills, understanding and beliefs? It is very important to include stories about moments when we had trouble learning one or more of these capacities. This gives children permission to talk about what is difficult and/or confusing. As adults, we often shield our children from difficult social-emotional moments in our lives. We don’t want to burden our children. Yet, this can sometimes, inadvertently contribute to children thinking that life is easy for us and we never have problems.*
- *Make social emotional learning a part of what you do at home and in the classroom: In the classroom, at the dinner table or in the car, there are many moments when we can think about how we are feeling and how the other person is feeling; what is the problem and what is our goal in facing a given decision or problem; what are our options and what would be the best ways to ‘tackle’ this situation; what do I really want to say to that person; how might I cooperate with others; how might I “reach out” to that person who I would like to get to know more?”*
- *Pay attention to the “match” between the child and the environment (home and/or classroom): We all come into the world with a “biological package” or temperament. Shyness, activity levels, soothability are just a few of the many temperamental dimensions that researchers have learned about in recent years. One of the important factors that can inadvertently complicate “connectedness” is when there is a poor match between the environment (home or classroom) and the child’s temperamental disposition. For example,*

some teachers insist that young children learn to sit still in their classrooms earlier than he or she is ready for. A poor match often contributes to children pulling back and disconnecting.

- Recognize changes: As our children grow physically, socially and emotionally, it is important to recognize and explicitly acknowledge these changes. Recognizing and validating these changes provides a foundation for connectedness. A wonderful way to talk about these kinds of changes is to tell children stories about ourselves when we were children. Sometimes, telling stories about our own changes without explicitly asking or suggesting that they should talk about their own changes allows them to be more comfortable and open up. For example, the passage into adolescence, which often begins well before the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, involves a series of extraordinary physical, mental, social and emotional changes. In conjunction with the very visible physical changes that accompany puberty and the new mental capacities that many adolescents show, we often see children becoming more independent and moving away from parents and teachers. However, the need to be connected to others and ourselves is as important as ever.

## **2) Problem Solving and Decision Making Abilities:**

*Definition and Overview: Life involves a series of decisions and problems. How we solve problems and make choices shapes our lives and our ability to handle conflicts in non-violent ways. Flexible and healthy decision making and problem solving involves engaging in a process of weighing options and consequences and coming to a conclusion that will result in positive and productive behavior. This competency includes the ability to develop and implement a plan, evaluate successes and barriers and revise the plan to accomplish the objectives effectively.*

Organizing Guidelines: There are helpful and unhelpful ways to solve problems and make decisions. It is useful to teach children the steps that characterize flexible and creative problem solving and decision-making.

A primary approach in learning to solve problems and to enhance decision-making abilities in children is to use a specific model. It is important to remember that for children to use this model, adults should be modeling this behavior and technique in their everyday life. Here is one example of an effective tool for problem solving and decision-making and planning:

1. Make a clear statement of what the problem is. Define the problem.
2. Consider possible solutions to the problem. What can we do to fix it?
3. Test and evaluate these conclusions and arrive at a solution.
4. Take action and implement the best solution.
5. Evaluate the results of the action. Did the plan work?

Example and Tips: Here are some examples and tips that may support your teaching children these essential violence prevention skills, understanding and beliefs:

- Talk about “good” and “not so good” problems: normalize the notion that life is a series of problems and decisions and that the key issue is how can we become flexible and creative problem solvers.
- Talk about times when we did not solve problems so well. This can allow children to reflectively consider their own helpful and not so helpful problem solving strategies.

- Underscore the importance for learning to recognize our emotional state and to “keep calm.” This is one of the foundations for helpful problem solving abilities.
- Be a learner with child(ren): Whatever happens when they (or we) are faced with a problem/decision can become a teachable moment, an opportunity to reflect and think about how we might have managed this if we could “rewind.”
- Appreciate and practice goal setting, the first critical stage in the problem solving process. How we (automatically or thoughtfully) set goals is important. Goals drive behavior.

One of very important decisions that children make pertains to what are acceptable and unacceptable ways to settle conflicts and disputes. Researchers have found that it is especially important to help middle school children (ages 6 to 11) learn about this. Helping middle school children to understand that it is not necessary to use physical force to settle disputes and to develop related skills and knowledge about how to manage interpersonal disputes is an important step in the creation of socially and emotionally as well as physically safe schools.

### **3) *Communicative capacities***

Definition and Overview: Communicative capacities refer to our ability to express ourselves and be clearly understood and the ability to understand what is being verbally and nonverbally transmitted back. Research has shown that fostering clear communication between children and adults is an important component to interpersonal violence prevention and the creation of safe schools (Piñata, 1999). It contributes to children feeling connected and less isolated from others. How we communicate as a parent and/or an educator becomes the model for how children communicate. Learning to put our feelings into words reduces the likelihood that we will feel frustrated and act aggressively or violently. Learning to communicate clearly and directly includes the ability to use refusal skills, assertiveness, and verbal as well as non-verbal methods to engage in positive behavior. Helping children to acquire observational, listening and other communication skills reduces conflict and helps children to handle problems more easily. If adults use inappropriate expressions and verbal put-downs, children will see these as acceptable forms of communication.

Organizing Guidelines: Communicating clearly and directly is hard work for everyone. Learning to communicate clearly and directly is an ongoing process. Pay attention to how your children communicate and recognize their efforts. Think about what kind of communicator you are: our actions become a model for our children.

Examples and tips: What follows are a number of examples and tips that can aid our efforts to foster this fundamentally important skill and understanding:

- Learn to listen: Pay attention to what the child/student is saying; find time to be alone with the child; don't interrupt; don't prepare how you will respond to the child while your child is speaking; reserve making judgments, decisions or arriving at conclusions and solutions until the child has finished speaking.
- Look at and observe the child: Be aware of the child's facial expressions and body language. Is the child nervous or uncomfortable or relaxed and happy? Reading these signs will help adults know how the child is feeling and respond more appropriately to the child. During the conversation, acknowledge what the child is saying and move close to the child, make eye contact and nod.
- Encourage respect for individual differences: If you are tolerant of people who are different from you, then the child will be more likely to model your behavior.
- Teach children, beginning at an early age, the importance of learning to say “no” or “time-out” when they feel uncomfortable.

- Respond and Recognize: Use “I-statements” to let the child know how YOU feel about what he or she is saying. Speak for yourself and do try to put words into the child’s mouth. Identify when it is important for you to tell the child what you believe about a topic/issue or when it would be better for him or her to figure out what he or she believes without your opinion. I-messages are simple, powerful ways to communicate our wants, needs and feelings. By teaching children to use these messages, you are giving them tools to help them in situations where they need to feel empowered and listened to.

#### **4) Impulse Control/Anger Management (Self-Management/Stress Management/Self-regulation)**

Definition and Overview: Impulse control and anger management refers to our ability to recognize when we are feeling impulsive and/or angry and manage these urges in appropriate, non-violent ways. Research has shown that learning how to control one’s impulses will reduce violent behavior (Guerra, in press). Anger is one of the most difficult emotions for children to manage. When children are angry, it is difficult for them to think clearly and make appropriate choices. This is why it is an important violence prevention strategy for children – beginning in the pre-Kindergarten years -- to learn about and practice impulse control and anger management. Research has shown that learning to control impulses at an early age reduces the likelihood of aggressive-violent behavior in adolescence.

Organizing Guidelines: Learning to control our impulses rests on our ability to recognize our emotional state, to contain these impulses and find safe and appropriate ways to express them. It is important for children to understand that it is okay to feel angry or impulsive. However, children need to learn that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to express these impulses. It is also useful for children to gradually learn that anger typically stems from frustration and/or loss.

Examples and tips: What follows are a series of ideas, examples and tips that can further your ability to help children learn to recognize and manage their impulses:

- Label emotions: your own and others. This helps children to develop a feelings vocabulary. If we can talk about our feelings, it is easier to recognize and manage them.
- Practice recognizing the physical signs or cues that accompany anger and other strong impulses. For example, the following questions can spur important discussion and discovery about this: How does your body feel when you are angry? What do your hands do? What does your face do? How does your voice sound? Do you walk, sit or stand differently?
- Talk about “ok” and “not so ok” ways to express strong impulses.
- Help children understand that anger typically grows out of frustration and/or hurt.
- Each classroom and home should engage in conversations like, “What do you want me to do when I am feeling angry or hurt?”
- Talk about the various ways that we manage feeling frustrated and hurt, both helpful and unhelpful ways.
- When a child is angry it is important to acknowledge his or her feelings. For example, “I can see you are angry.” “It looks like you are pretty angry/mad about...” This is important because many children calm down quickly when they realize someone recognizes how they are feeling.
- To help children understand what triggers anger, you can ask them to make statements like: “I get angry when...”

- We can and need to teach children how to “keep calm.” Generate a list of ways that the child can stay calm. Refer to the list when the child gets angry.

## **5) Cooperative Capacities**

Definition and Overview: Cooperating refers to our capacity to work together in pairs and groups. Being able to listen, to take turns and to develop collaborative goals and strategies to accomplish these goals is an essential set of skills and knowledge that provides the foundation for this ability. Research has shown that cooperation is a core competency that allows us to develop healthy friendships and positive relationships throughout life (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

When children cooperate, they learn to appreciate the strengths and differences of each classmate and/or family member. They also learn to wait and take turns. This creates an atmosphere of acceptance, tolerance and respect. When children play and work together, the environment is less competitive because the goal of cooperation is success of the group/family rather than the individual.

Organizing Guidelines: Being able to cooperate is pleasurable and meaningful. It is also hard work. The capacity to cooperate rests on a number of social and emotional skills and understandings that include active listening; impulse control and the ability to taking turns; learning to identify and set goals; learning to appreciate what others are thinking and doing; learning to contribute new ideas; being able to ask for help, helping others and learning to accept help; taking responsibility for one's actions; and, working toward a shared goal.

Examples and Tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can further our ability to teach and learn about this core competency:

- When we have a cooperative opportunity, acknowledge this. Be explicit about cooperation as an important and sometimes, difficult process.
- Encourage children to ask for help when they are having a problem in an interaction. Asking for help is not an admission of failure, but it identifies that there is a problem that needs to be solved.
- Ask: What is the problem? What have you tried to do to solve the problem already? How do you want me to help?
- Children are anxious to put blame on someone for a problem. Encourage them to look at the situation as a problem to be solved rather than a question of who is to blame. If the child sees that you do not put value on “fault,” then it will not be an issue in the future.
- Suggest possible solutions when the child is stuck but try to give the child choices so that he/she feels empowered.
- After a cooperative exercise or experience, talk about what it was like. What was easy? What was difficult? How can we learn from this?

## **6) Forming Friendships**

Definition and overview: The ability to form friendships rests on many other social and emotional competencies: being able to listen to ourselves and the other person; being

able to control our impulses; being able to communicate and cooperate. Research has shown that forming friendships is essential for children's healthy development and happiness (Guerra, in press; Parker, et. al, 1995). Friendships provide a needed sense of belonging for children and adults alike. Friends offer security and support and are important in times of difficulties and rough spots in life. Without friends, individuals can develop negative, anti-social behaviors. Researchers have re-affirmed the importance of a stable peer group in early adolescence (ages 12 to 14) (Allen, Weissberg, & Hawkins, 1989) and, in part, shapes to what extent this group is primary pro-social or antisocial affects the probability of aggressive and violent behavior. Positive, supportive friendships permit children to deal effectively with risky and negative life situations.

A key factor in helping children build friendships is understanding why the child likes or dislikes interacting and playing with another child. What do the children like to do together? Who is the leader and who is the follower? Do they prefer one-on-one interactions or enjoy group play more often?

Organizing Guidelines: Learning to be a friend is one of the most important capacities we can develop. We need to help children value good friendships and develop the skills and understandings that provide the platform for healthy, supportive and caring relationships. Being a friend is fun, however, as children move into the elementary school years, being a friend also takes time and energy.

Examples and Tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can further our ability to teach and learn about this core competency:

- Learn who the child's friends are.
- Get to know the parents/caregivers of the children.
- Talk about the importance of friendship and the pleasure of getting to know all different kinds of people in the world.
- Provide the child with an opportunity to get to know his or her friend in your home.
- Help the child assess the negative and positive qualities of his or her friendships.
- Encourage open communication about the friendships.
- Encourage the child to be an "individual" and to not try to "be like" his or her friends.
- Help the child to learn to say "no" in a friendship while still maintaining the friendship.
- Help the child learn when the friendship is unhealthy and harmful to his or her self-esteem.

## **7) Recognizing and Appreciating Diversity and Differences**

*Definition and overview: Younger children are trying to build an understanding of the world around them. Their interest in exploring who they are makes them aware of the differences and similarities in others around them. They may notice gender, age, color or physical differences in people.*

*Children are often victimized by peers because of their sexual orientation or their confusion about their sexual or gender identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth who attend both public and independent schools are often harassed relentlessly and sometimes physically attacked.*

*By learning to acknowledge differences without bias, children help to create an environment where each child can feel comfortable about his or her differences and feel safe taking risks, or being an individual in a group.*

Some skills associated with appreciating differences are identifying differences and similarities in a nonjudgmental way; using appropriate language to acknowledge or ask questions about differences; learning to be assertive or to stand up for themselves or others; building empathy about others' feelings. Differences can lead to conflict. Children need to learn to appreciate human differences as enriching, rather than threatening. The more children understand about prejudice and discrimination, the more they will be able to resist prejudice themselves.

Organizing Guidelines: Both children and adults make pre-judgments (prejudice) about others. It is useful to recognize how and when we do this. It is important to learn that if someone is different this does not mean that they are 'bad.' People who are different often evoke anxiety and fear. Teasing and bullying are one way that some children negatively manage this anxiety and fear.

Tips and examples: Some tips for building these skills:

- Acknowledge differences: The more children hear that adults are comfortable with differences and the more you discuss this with respect and ease, the more they will be able to accept differences.
- Recognize that one common reaction to the other person being different is anxiety.
- Use culturally diverse teaching materials: Post pictures around the classroom that depict people from diverse backgrounds interacting with each other. It is also helpful to post pictures of people with a variety of body types or physical abilities.
- Create diverse groups: Make a conscious effort to put children from different backgrounds in small groups together. Research has shown that working in small, cooperative groups is an effective way to help young people overcome fears and stereotypes (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).
- Involve families in your curriculum: Celebrate different holidays and traditions in your classroom and have the people from each religion/culture explain the holiday/tradition to the class.
- Foster inclusion: Take time to celebrate each child as an important member of the group.

### **8) Altruistic capacities:**

Definition and overview: Altruistic capacities refers to people's inclination to be concerned about and helpful towards others.

Organizing Guidelines:

The capacity and inclination to be helpful towards others is one of the organizing processes that fosters safer schools. It is important to remember that empathy can be used in helpful (e.g. altruistic) or unhelpful (anti-social) ways. For example, when a child empathizes with someone who has inadvertently hurt his or her feelings, it promotes essential social and emotional capacities like maintaining friendships. But, when children learn to empathize with the ability to manipulate their peers, this undermines friendships and trust. As is the case with all of the core social-emotional competencies described here, the capacity to be altruistic is shaped by a constellation of social-emotional skills, knowledge and values. For example, to be altruistic, children need to be able to actively listen to others, to empathize and reflect and to be creative social-emotional problem solvers. Children need to understand that healthy social relations rest on our helping as well as being helped by others. And, the belief or value that helping others is a social responsibility supports the development of this core social-emotional competency.

Like all competencies, altruism and the capacity to act in pro-social ways develops over time. Altruistic behaviors have been observed in children as young as 2 years of age. As maturation results in new capacities, children's abilities in these areas blossom. For example, when verbal skills develop in the early elementary school years, children's ability to understand others, to "connect" and to help others enhances. In early adolescence the development of greater abstract capacities (which enhances our ability put ourselves in "the other persons shoes") dramatically promotes their ability to empathize with others and thereby, be helpful to others.

Examples and tips: Below are examples and tips to aid our efforts to build altruistic capacities in children.

- Be a role model! How do you show that you are helpful to others? Talk about this. There is pleasure in helping others. Let your children or students discover this themselves
- Provide opportunities for older children to help younger children (i.e. mentoring programs).
- Talk about the pleasures of giving and receiving help. To the extent that there is a balance in our lives, both are important and pleasurable facets of life.
- Discuss world and local events to identify concrete ways for children to express concern, and help others.
- Encourage community service and provide opportunities for children to feel and be responsible for others and the environment, e.g., community trash cleanup, raking leaves for old people/neighbors etc.
- When a classmate/friend is absent due to illness, provide help by having a classmate call, take projects to the child, or make a visit.
- Discuss bullying and the importance of children standing together to assist the victim, AND to help the bully change behaviors.

- Foster altruistic class projects: e.g. class to adopt an orphan in a third world country and raise money for them and correspond regularly.
- Introduce a regular time for reflection on these matters in the classroom and at home (e.g. the dinner table).