

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

5 Simple Lessons for Social and Emotional Learning for Adults

MAY 20, 2014

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In my last blog I made the case for social emotional learning (SEL) for all – for children, teachers, administrators, coaches, and all other staff working in and with schools. I promised suggestions for how this could be done in schools. The following lessons can be taken up by an entire staff or by an individual and are intended to build emotional awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

Lesson 1: Practice Recognizing Emotions

Spend a day or an hour observing your emotional responses. You might, for example, notice yourself arriving at school and feeling anxious about getting everything done before kids arrive. Just notice this, and say to yourself, "There's anxiety." You might notice that when you pass a particular colleague's room, you feel content because she's a friend. Notice this, "There's contentment." The key is to notice and name without attaching judgment. If you like you can take notes or journal so that you can keep a log of your emotional journey over a period of time. There might be moments when you don't know how to name what you're feeling, and that's okay. Jot down all the words that come to mind.

Lesson 2: Notice Physical Responses

Honing the ability to recognize how your body experiences emotions is another step. Our bodies often manifest feelings and if we can become conscious of our responses, we may gain useful information. For example, you might notice yourself smiling authentically when a parent drops off her child – and then you might notice the underlying emotions – "Gratitude. This mother is always so positive." Or you might notice that when you talk to an administrator your shoulders tense, your belly tightens, and your breathing gets shallow. And then you might be able to recognize the underlying feelings, "Defensive and anxious."

When we gain awareness, we can make decisions about how we want to behave. For example, if we notice we're feeling anxious when talking to an administrator, we might just take a deep breath or drop our shoulders. Noticing and naming our emotions means we move away from operating on autopilot. It's usually a more empowered place to be.

Lesson 3: Get Curious

Once you've started noticing and naming your emotions, get curious about them. Investigate. Explore. You might notice anxiety when talking to an administrator and reflect on this: "Have I always felt this way? When did it start? How do I feel when talking to my other administrator? What does this one trigger in me? Where did that come from?" The purpose in doing this isn't to dig deep into your own psychological history, it's to infuse the experience with questions, wondering, and curiosity. This can loosen the grip of the emotions and also illuminate something about the experience that might be helpful.

Lesson 4: Observe Your Emotions

We are not our emotions. If we can practice observing them – seeing ourselves experience emotions from 10,000 feet above earth – we are more likely to make decisions that don't emerge from them. We might notice that sometimes they're powerful and gripping, and sometimes they're lighter and less sticky. It helps to practice non-attachment to emotions. They're just emotional states and they come and go – and remember that we have some control over these states. Sometimes I visualize my emotions as weather patterns: There are storms and calm skies, heavy rain, and light winds. They always change. I visualize myself as a tree experiencing these emotions that come and go.

Lesson 5: Notice the Impact of Your Emotions on Others

Without getting into self-judgment, start noticing how your emotional states impact others. The key is to think like a scientist and make comments to yourself such as, "Oh, that's interesting! I never noticed that. Wow, look at what happens to X when I am feeling _____." For example, you might notice that you always greet one of your students with big smiles, warm welcomes, and that you feel really happy when you see him. You might then notice, "Wow, after I greet him that way, I see his face relax, his smile widens, and he calmly sits at his desk." Or you might notice that when you were feeling tired and anxious and you curtly asked the school secretary for a form, that her shoulders hunched up and she was snappy in return. As you do this noticing, try again to refrain from self-criticism. Just notice. Name. Observe.

Here's my fantasy: a school staff engages in these practices for a few weeks or months. As they do so, they discuss the experience, what they're noticing, and what they're learning. This could take only 10 minutes per week (at the beginning of a staff meeting or professional development, for example) or it could be given the time it really deserves – a hour or longer per week. These lessons would incorporate expanding our vocabulary for emotions (this is a skill set that's missing in many adults) as well as developing our tool kit for how to respond to difficult emotions. And to extend my fantasy, I'd love to see all staff *and* all students in a school engaging in this learning together.

This would be a start – a very powerful, transformational start – for providing adults with the social and emotional learning that we deserve. I also know that it would make our schools calmer and happier places to be.

What are your thoughts on SEL for adults on school campuses? Please share in the comments section below.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/five-social-emotional-learning-lessons-for-adults-elena-aguilar

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