Strengthening social and emotional learning in children with special needs

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Introduction

Locally and globally, guiding children's social and emotional development is no longer optional for educators. Research undertaken over the last 20 years provides compelling evidence that early and ongoing development of socio-emotional skills contributes to an individual's overall health, wellbeing and competence throughout life. Moreover, competence in this domain is now recognised as fundamental to school readiness, school adjustment and academic achievement. As a consequence, social and emotional learning (SEL) is an important theme in current educational policy, curriculum frameworks and classroom practice. This chapter focuses on a particular group of vulnerable learners – children with special needs – and highlights key strategies for educators to use in their everyday classroom practices to strengthen SEL in children from early years through to the end of primary school.

Children with special needs

Within the chapter, 'special needs' is used to describe children (0–12 years) on the autism spectrum; with intellectual and other developmental disabilities; with sensory impairments including hearing, vision and physical; with communication, emotional or behaviour disorders; and with learning difficulties. These children are at high risk of developing social and emotional problems because their presenting conditions negatively influence growth in two critical areas of functioning: attention, planning and problem-solving; and language and communication (Deiner, 2013; Stormont, 2007). It follows that delays in these areas routinely put in place the conditions not only for reduced opportunities to engage, interact and learn with others, but also the increased likelihood of developing challenging, unsafe and socially inappropriate behaviours.

Recommended teaching model for SEL

The teaching pyramid model (Fox et al., 2003) provides a strong framework for supporting SEL, particularly in the earlier years of learning. Its level of effectiveness in building social-emotional competence and preventing problems has been demonstrated not only with toddlers, but also with school-age children. The model is both educative and preventative. It comprises four hierarchal and interrelated levels of practice, with each level providing the foundation for the next (see Figure 21.1). Within this framework, behavioural intervention is viewed as a consequence of insufficient consideration given by educators to the lower levels of the model – that is, to building positive relationships, providing supportive learning environments and the explicit teaching of social-emotional skills. Hence, the first three levels of practice in

this model provide a sound structure for educators seeking to strengthen SEL in all children, including those with special needs.

Figure 21.1 *The teaching pyramid*
Source: Fox et al. (2003, p. 49).

Building positive relationships

The quality and reliability of relationships with important 'others' has a significant influence on children's wellbeing, development, academic success and future life outcomes. From birth, responsive relationships and shared interactions between carers and young children promote the development of secure attachments, the confidence to explore and learn, and a framework for moral behaviour and emotional regulation. From the early years of formal schooling, and extending through the primary years, successful interactions with peers are a strong predictor of positive mental health and school success. For these reasons, building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships with and around all children is vital.

Many children with special needs experience substantial difficulties in establishing and maintaining positive relationships and interactions with both adults and peers. Personal attributes, competencies and actions often set them apart, and prevent them from being connected and belonging to the group (Beamish & Sagers, 2013). Because interaction is a two-way process, and positive interactions are the building blocks for rapport and relationships, educators need to interact positively and frequently with this group of learners, and provide the role model for other staff and peers. Strategies extend beyond showing warmth, respect and consideration. Responding sensitively and promptly to any communication attempts (verbal and non-verbal), inserting exchanges with the child across classroom routines and activities, and acknowledging children's efforts are examples of everyday strategies that need to be employed in order to show children with

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special needs and others that they are valued and contributing members of classroom communities.

Providing supportive learning environments

Supportive learning environments foster the healthy growth, wellbeing and SEL of all children within them. Simply put, they are places where children want to be. Providing an environment to actively support SEL for children with special needs, however, is no easy matter. It demands careful consideration, planning, management and monitoring.

First, the learning environment needs to be warm, accepting and responsive, so that the child has meaningful, formal and informal opportunities to not only interact positively with staff and selected peers but also listen to, model and learn new communication, social and emotional skills and behaviours from them. Over time, these ongoing interactions and exchanges provide a starting point for the child to develop a sense of belonging, building positive relationships with peers, and ultimately establishing and maintaining friendships.

Second, the learning environment needs to be sensitively structured so that the child feels safe and secure, engages in classroom activity and develops independence and self-direction. Structuring involves preparing and adjusting the physical environment in relation to the management of time, space, furnishings, materials and equipment. Time-management is a crucial factor to be considered when teaching children with special needs. The majority of these children feel safe and learn best when they are provided with a predictable routine and follow a regular schedule of activities. Visual schedules can be used to prepare them ahead of time for transitioning to the next activity or to changes in the regular schedule. Spaces also can be creatively adjusted to serve a multitude of purposes. For example, a cosy and comfortable area with clear physical boundaries can be created for children to use for informal interactions, and for an individual child to use when anxious or upset.

Third, the learning environment needs to be managed carefully so that the child progressively learns to monitor their own behaviour and emotions. Adherence to classroom rules and codes of acceptable behaviour is fostered when clear and fair behavioural expectations and consequences are consistently put into effect. Gaining the child's attention before giving directions, individualising the directions and giving the child sufficient time to respond to directions increases the likelihood of compliance. Noticing and reinforcing instances of good behaviour by providing acknowledgement, access to a favourite activity or earning a special job frequently increases coping, tolerance and engagement across daily routines and activities. Finally, spending time understanding, preventing and responding effectively to low levels of problem behaviour can often alleviate the need for intense behavioural intervention at a later date.

Teaching critical social-emotional skills

Teaching critical social-emotional skills to children with special needs involves making decisions about *what to teach* and *how to teach*. The *what* refers to individually targeted SEL content that needs to be referenced to the curriculum and specified in terms of the scope of knowledge and the skill or behaviour to be learnt. The *how* refers to the key learning arrangements through which the targeted content will be delivered (e.g. teaching strategies, equipment and materials, pace of instruction, embedded learning opportunity).

Determining what to teach

Critical social-emotional skills need to be acquired in a structured and sequenced way across the years of schooling. Curriculum frameworks, areas, content descriptions and achievement standards typically provide the anchors for skill scoping and sequencing. For many years, the internationally recognised SEL framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003) has provided key areas for guiding *what to teach*. These areas are:

- *self-awareness* – identifying and recognising emotions; accurate self-perception, recognising strengths, needs, and values; self-efficacy
- *self-management* – impulse-control and stress-management; self-motivation and discipline; goal-setting and organisational skills
- *social awareness* – perspective-taking; empathy; difference-recognition; respect for others
- *relationship management* – communication, social engagement and relationship-building; working cooperatively; negotiation, refusal; conflict management; help-seeking
- *responsible decision-making* – problem-identification and situation-analysis; problem-solving; evaluation and reflection; personal, social and ethical responsibility.

At the curriculum level, the Australian Council and Assessment Reporting Agency (ACARA), in common with educational institutions in many other countries, has drawn upon the CASEL framework for structuring SEL content. In the Australian Curriculum, SEL is embedded in the General Capabilities dimension under the label of Personal and Social Capabilities. Importantly, personal and social capability skills are specifically equated to social and emotional skills, and referenced to SEL. They also are recognised as foundational supports to student learning across the curriculum:

Personal and social capability skills are addressed in all learning areas and at every stage of a student's schooling. This enables teachers to plan for the teaching of targeted skills specific to an individual's learning needs to provide access to and engagement with the learning areas ... The personal and social capability is addressed through the learning areas and is identified wherever it is developed

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or applied in content descriptions. It is also identified where it offers opportunities to add depth and richness to student learning in content elaborations. (ACARA, 2013, pp. 2–3)

Hence the progressive levels of skills detailed in the Personal and Social Capability Learning Continuum provides content relevant to children with special needs under the elements of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management. In general, determining what to teach requires initial and thoughtful consideration on the goodness of fit between the child's age, ability, curriculum demands and classroom activities with peers. SEL content then needs to be selected carefully according to the child's assessed social-emotional need and cultural background. Family involvement in this decision-making is recommended, together with increased input from the child over time. In addition, SEL content should target only one or two specific skills or behaviours for a particular period of time. When making these decisions, a number of factors should be considered – for example, the social significance of the skill, the number of years left for schooling, the level of home–school cooperation, the learning diversity in the class.

Determining how to teach

Social-emotional skills need to be taught within the security of positive relationships and supportive learning environments. Under these conditions, SEL can be nurtured and critical skills addressed through systematic and sustained attention (Zins & Elias, 2006). In common with academic learning, SEL for children with special needs requires explicit teaching, practice and reinforcement across a range of activities and settings, to ensure that skill generalisation and maintenance take place. Moreover, skills need to be not only taught to mastery but also consolidated through motivational activities that ensure frequent use of skills.

Furthermore, teaching social-emotional skills should be anchored by *SAFE* practices (Durlak et al., 2011). These recommended practices are:

- *Sequenced.* New and more complicated skills are frequently broken down into smaller steps and sequentially mastered by the child.
- *Active.* Teaching activities are focused on actively engaging the child in learning.
- *Focused.* Sufficient time and attention are devoted to each activity task so that learning occurs.
- *Explicit.* A clear and specific learning objective is set for the teaching and assessment of each skill.

In addition, determining how to teach requires a responsive pairing of a systematic and intentional teaching approach with the child's interests, preferences and learning style. When activities and materials have a goodness of fit with these inclinations, learning is promoted through increased motivation and engagement. It is important to remember that children with special needs are typically poorly motivated because

they repeatedly experience failure and often do not readily engage in activities because of the difficulties they experience in gaining and maintaining attention to task.

Increasing social understanding

Social understanding is a crucial component of SEL because it is commonly viewed as the roots of our social behaviour. Acquiring this understanding permits us to navigate our social world, interact effectively with each other, form successful relationships and become members of a community. Social understanding has both social and cognitive aspects. It stems from being aware of self and evolves over time through communicative interactions with others and one's cognitive interpretation of these experiences, beliefs and emotions (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). The complex process involves becoming aware of one's ideas, inferring these ideas on others, becoming aware that others have ideas and reflecting on the ideas of others in relation to self (Kostelnik et al., 2012).

From a curriculum perspective, and using the personal and social capabilities elements, good social understanding can be seen to entail adequate self-awareness, efficient self-management, appropriate social awareness and effective social management. Within this framework, self-awareness provides the child with the ability to effectively understand self, as well as the skills to recognise emotions. Self-management and self-regulation allow the child to exercise control over personal actions, thoughts and emotions. Social awareness provides the child with the ability to cultivate a sense of self and understand the perspective of others, while skills in social management allow the child to maintain social rules, interact effectively and successfully work with others. It is also important to recognise that increased social understanding and related skill acquisition also contribute to aspects that make a positive difference to children's learning and children's lives – namely self-identity, self-confidence, self-discipline and resilience.

Children with special needs typically have very poor social understanding. Taken as a group, language and cognitive delays coupled with difficulties in attending to others and the environment often contribute to these children experiencing problems in developing an awareness of self as an independent being and an awareness of feelings and emotions. They also experience difficulties in differentiating between feelings and behaviours. The group in general lacks the ability to adequately reflect on feelings, control impulses, monitor behaviours, handle stress and frustrations, and resist temptations and pressure from peers.

If careful attention is given to fostering self-management skills, however, these children can become more self-determined learners who, in the long term, can take control of many aspects of their lives (King-Sears, 2006). Yet many continue to respond impulsively to social situations without pausing to appreciate the perspectives of others, or connecting consequences to their actions. These circumstances

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result in the majority of children with special needs – including those on the autism spectrum – not having the social awareness or ability to effectively manage social situations in private and in public by the end of primary school.

It follows that incidental and structured class SEL activities are not sufficient to promote adequate social understanding in this group of learners. In most cases, strategic small-group and/or individualised SEL interventions are warranted to build social knowledge, interactions and skills from early years through to the end of primary schooling. While typically developing children construct social understanding through a process of observation, self-reflection and imagination, children with special needs require a more teacher-directed approach to gradually acquire these understandings. For the last few decades, interventions have frequently used evidence-based teaching strategies such as peer-mediated instruction. Increasingly, interventions are becoming multi-modal in nature, and feature promising strategies such as video priming and self-modelling, social stories and specialised visual supports (see Box 21.1 for suggested organisations and resources available online). The strategies that follow provide additional strategies to support SEL across three age groups: 0–5 years; 5–8 years; and 8–12 years.

Box 21.1 SEL resources and organisations available online

- Bullying, No Way
- *beyondblue*
- Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA)
- headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation
- Kids Helpline @ School
- KidsMatter (Families, Early Childhood, Primary Schools)
- Mind Matters, National Mental Health Initiative for Secondary Schools
- Raising Children Network, The Australian Parenting Website
- Response Ability Initiative
- Polyxo.com visual support material (including social stories)
- Technical Assistance Centre on Social-Emotional Intervention (TACSEI)
- The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding
- The National Development Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders
- The National Center on Accessible Instructional Materials
- Use Visual Strategies
- video modelling and social skills development
- Scott Bellini and Tom Buggy's resources – video modelling
- Watch Me Learn
- Wellbeing Australia, Building Healthy Communities

Strategies understanding

0–5 years

- Strengthen adult
- Practise
- Provide
- Provide
- Engage (e.g. I)
- Have
- Encourage look I
- Engage they a
- Promote the cl
- Limit
- Help t
- Ensure
- Maint

5–8 years

- Strengthen joinin
- Play b solvin
- Identify dealin
- Provide social
- Work : respon
- Maint
- Use vi the ur

Strategies to support social understanding

0–5 years

- Strengthen basic social rules (e.g. sharing, using your words, being gentle). Have adults model and support the skill being promoted.
- Practise and reward all positive social interactions.
- Provide structure to social events.
- Provide preparation, rehearsal and practice prior to unstructured social activities.
- Engage in simple turn-taking games (e.g. Pat-a-cake, Peek-a-boo), card games (e.g. Fish, Concentration and Snap,) and simple board games.
- Have adults model how to support the needs of others (e.g. child crying).
- Encourage use of language to express emotions by labelling emotions (e.g. 'You look like you are feeling happy').
- Engage in active listening to get the child's version of what happened and what they are experiencing.
- Prompt the child's recount with questions such as 'What happened first?' and pair the child's recount with the emotions you think are being felt.
- Limit concern and stress where possible, and reduce demands in stressful activities.
- Help the child to identify activities or things that are calming or promote relaxation.
- Ensure consistency in structure and routine (e.g. establish set routines and rules).
- Maintain a warm and supportive environment.

5–8 years

- Strengthen social rules for greetings, everyday interactions at school and home, joining a group.
- Play board games that require sharing and turn-taking, and simple problem-solving.
- Identify, express and label emotions using language. Model and label emotions and dealing with different emotions.
- Provide opportunities to practise simple role-play and modelling activities to solve social situations.
- Work in pairs, threes or small groups to complete tasks. Give children roles and responsibilities to support groups (e.g. scribe).
- Maintain routines and a structured, supportive environment.
- Use video priming and self-modelling, social stories and visual supports to reinforce the understanding of key concepts associated with a skill.

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- Offer problem-solving opportunities and encourage alternative solution-generation.
- Share in joint activities such as shared reading, cooking and recreational games.
- Encourage special interests and hobbies.
- Use peer buddy systems.
- Help children identify things that are creating stress for them. Identify things they like to do to keep calm or help them to relax when worried.
- Help children to recognise body signs related to being worried.
- Share brainstorming sessions to develop a suite of ideas that will help them relax or stay calm when worries develop.
- Share concerns and worries so children realise it is normal to have worries.
- Highlight the good things that happen in the day. Reward staying positive and dealing with worries.

8–12 years

- Strengthen social rules for conversations (face to face and on devices), group interactions and relating to others in the community.
- Engage in problem-solving activities in teams or groups.
- Use class or team meetings to address the social issues of the group.
- Provide opportunities to teach and practise social skills in small-group and whole-group contexts.
- Practise skills of negotiation and compromise.
- Practise skills for dealing with compliments, competition, and winning and losing.
- Encourage practice of social skills in co-ed groups.
- Challenge worrying thoughts by having children consider how accurate these thoughts really are, and assess the alternatives.
- 'Normalise' feeling anxious or worried by allowing children to share their concerns, and have adults model and share their concerns too.
- Encourage children to read their body signs and practise how to deal with them. Visualise support through the use of body thermometers to express how they are feeling.
- Rehearse calming activities and routines to include exercise, calm breathing activities and muscle-relaxation activities.
- Use role-play to act out positive ways to deal with emotions and stress.
- Maintain routines and a structured, supportive environment.
- Encourage independence and calculated risk-taking.
- Model confidence and appropriate responses to everyday social situations.

Partnering with families

SEL for children with special needs is substantially boosted through partnering with families. When families are supported, the home can provide the best conditions for fostering emotional security and the natural conditions for learning many social skills. Moreover, when there is strong alignment and consistency in support across environments, optimum conditions are provided for the repeated practice, consolidation and generalisation of critical social-emotional skills.

Partnering with families often requires educators to take the lead in building a trusting relationship with parents/caregivers and actively striving to understand the family and the home ecology. Learning about family structure, culture, values and child-rearing practices often provides insight into parent-child relationships and the day-to-day challenges faced by both the family and the child. Research confirms that the burden of raising a child with special needs results in many parents having significantly elevated levels of stress and reduced marital satisfaction compared with parents of typically developing children.

Supporting families to strengthen SEL in the home involves not only sharing specific information about the child and the targeted learning, but also making connections to explicit practices at home. For example, the importance of following a consistent daily routine at home needs to be explained carefully, together with the value of indirect teaching and guided learning. While much of this information can be provided on an individual basis, school-wide family engagement activities and workshops, the creation of an SEL lending library or resource centre, and even an SEL advisory board can be used to promote SEL and partnering with families (Albright, Weissberg & Dusenbury, 2011).

Once SEL partnering has been established, maintaining effective communication with families is essential. The following strategies provide effective ways to support ongoing communication and partnerships with families:

- child-centred communication that is specific to the child
- constructive information that is meaningful and useful because it provides families with clear and concrete suggestions
- specific information about classroom and school-wide policies and practices
- a back-and-forth journal or folder for parents and educators
- invitations for families to observe and actively participate in SEL classroom activities
- regular newsletters to keep parents informed and involved.

Summary

Social-emotional wellbeing is presently viewed as the passport to success at school and in life. Because skills in this area have positive effects on school adjustment,

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academic achievement and overall health, growth and competence, they are no longer taken for granted. SEL therefore has become an important theme in current educational policy, curriculum frameworks and classroom practice. As a consequence, educators are being pressed to provide quality SEL experiences to all children in their classrooms, including children with special needs.

The key messages highlighted in this chapter are:

- Children with special needs are at high risk of developing social and emotional problems because they experience difficulties in (1) attention, planning and problem-solving; and (2) language and communication. These difficulties often result in these children having reduced opportunities to engage, interact and learn with others.
- The teaching pyramid model provides a strong framework for strengthening SEL in children with special needs. The model recommends building positive relationships, providing supportive learning environments and teaching critical social-emotional skills in order to reduce the likelihood of developing challenging, unsafe and socially inappropriate behaviours.
- SEL content for this group of learners should be drawn predominately from relevant content in the personal and social capabilities section of the General Capabilities dimension of the Australian Curriculum. Elements are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management. These elements contribute to social understanding, a crucial component of SEL for students with special needs.
- SEL instruction for this group of learners should be guided by the *SAFE* practices (sequenced, active, focused and explicit), and focus on the repeated practice, consolidation and reinforcement of specific skills across a range of activities and settings.
- SEL for this group of learners is boosted when there is strong alignment between home and school. Educators need to not only encourage but also support families in these endeavours.

Questions

- 21.1 Why is it important for an educator to have positive beliefs about children with special needs?
- 21.2 What can be done to build positive relationships with and around children with special needs? Provide two strategies for each example:
 - a a toddler from a refugee family
 - b a child with autism commencing school
 - c a pre-adolescent with learning difficulties.

- 21.3 How can the classroom environment be adjusted so that is more responsive to children with special needs and their SEL? Provide two examples across the three age groups: 0–5 years; 5–8 years; and 8–12 years.
- 21.4 Why is it important for educators to encourage and support families of children with special needs to partner in SEL?

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