WHAT ARE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS?

Social and emotional skills are linked but not the same. We all have emotions and we all need to learn to manage them, so they enable us to make the most of our own lives and develop respectful and fulfilling relationships with others.

Emotional skills are about learning to manage and express feelings appropriately. Social skills are about relating to others. They involve being able to be a friend, to negotiate our needs and difficulties, to be assertive without being aggressive and to relate effectively with adults and peers.

WHY SHOULD SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING BE THE BASIS FOR CURRICULUM?

The evidence for the importance of social and emotional learning is overwhelming. The first principle of the Early Years Learning Framework is about the importance of relationships to learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12). The first outcome—for children to have a strong sense of identity—is about feelings and relationship. The second outcome includes ‘participating in meaningful relationships and contributing to group play’ (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 21 & 26).

The draft Australian national curriculum identifies as important, ‘general capabilities’ including personal and social competence (ACARA, [n.d]).

And there is a mountain of research over recent decades, just a few examples of which are quoted here:

‘... the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades, and not classroom behavior, but rather, the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously at risk.’ [Hartup, 1992, p. 1].

‘Data shows that children who are systematically taught social and emotional skills like how to manage their distressing emotions better, empathize and collaborate do better: have fewer problems such as substance abuse and violence, like school more and pay more attention in class—and score significantly better (11%, on average) on academic achievement test scores.’ [Goleman, 2008, p. 1]

Without social and emotional skills children cannot learn as effectively and cannot make the most of their learning. A child who is afraid in the classroom or in the schoolyard or bringing fears from home cannot concentrate on learning. A child who has not learned to consider others cannot use what they learn to make effective negotiations in the real world.
Children who have good feelings about themselves and about others and who know how to express their emotions and relate to others will be more effective learners, achievers and citizens. If these skills are not the basis for the curriculum, we are short-changing children no matter how well we teach. There is no doubt about this. The big question is how we teach social and emotional skills.

**HOW DO WE TEACH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS?**

There is a lot about the importance of teaching social and emotional skills in the Early Years Learning Framework. It is a great place to start, remembering that it is a framework, not a ‘how to’ guide. The national curriculum will be giving more explanation of general capabilities in its next iteration in Term 1, 2011; however, it is unclear at this stage whether there will be guidelines for teaching these skills. They may well be areas where educators need to find their own resources, and services need to put their own training in place to be sure that staff have the skills and time for such teaching.

It is not enough to say that children learn these things from the way we treat them and the modelling we do. They also need to be taught in a planned way, as with other subjects. And in addition they need to be taught as teaching opportunities (teachable moments) arise, especially in the early years. For example we know that four- and five-year olds are interested in making relationships with their peers. We can teach relationship skills. And when we see a child acting aggressively to another child, rather than just stopping the act, we can take this teachable moment to listen and to talk with both children about how they are feeling and ways to express their feelings and needs. Telling them what not to do—‘Don’t hit’—or even what to do—‘Be kind’—is not enough. They need us to teach them how to manage feelings and relationships.

Here are a few ideas for consideration:

- Make a meaningful relationship with each child in your care so they feel safe with you and valued by you—this is the context for successful teaching.
- When issues arise, no matter what, let each child know that you are there to help them.
- Really listen. Children who don’t feel heard, cannot hear you.
- Remember behaviour is a communication.
- Notice and act when you see a child is having some difficulty; for example, being left out, being aggressive, being very quiet, being fearful, not being aware of others’ needs, not attending and so on ...

Some areas that you might consider getting more information/resources/training about if you don’t already feel confident to teach them might include:

- managing feelings
- group joining skills
- social skills
- helping the child who is left out
- children’s aggression
- building relationships with children
- building relationships with families
- bullying and teasing.

When I talked with a very experienced teacher about these areas and the possible difficulty in making time for all this he said: ‘There’s no such thing as there is not time. It’s what the job is.’

KidsMatter (www.kidsmatter.edu.au) is a very positive initiative towards helping children develop these skills and information and resources are available to schools and preschools to put it into practice.

Pam Linke
Early childhood and parenting consultant

**References**

