

SOCIAL SKILLS

THRIVING INDICATORS



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Social Skills

Framing: What are social skills?

Optimal social skills involve behaving appropriately in differing social situations and interacting well with others. They are demonstrated through body language, and by what you say and don't say. Social skills impact many life domains, and the development of these skills plays a critical role in improving relationships, academic performance, lifelong learning, and emotional well-being. ¹

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading not-for-profit that works to advance the science of social and emotional learning (SEL), synthesizing the implications for practice. The organization defines socially competent youth as those who can:

- Take the perspective of and empathize with others. This includes recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences.
- Establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on good communication and cooperation.
- Resist negative social pressure.
- Seek and provide help to others when needed.
- Demonstrate responsible decision-making at school, at home, and in the community, considering ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and the likely consequences of various courses of action.²

In general, youth in middle school are learning to develop these skills, while youth in high school have the expanded ability to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and practice at improvement. Middle school students should be able to employ strategies for resisting peer pressure; high-school students should be able to employ thoughtful

decision-making with analysis of how current decisions affect their future. ³

"Social development and academic development are inextricably connected. Findings illustrate how problems in one domain may lead to problems in another."

- Dr. Miles, Stanford Professor

Navigating multiple worlds

Part of social skills is knowing how to interact with people of different ages, from diverse backgrounds, and with disparate beliefs and cultures. This includes close relationships with friends and family, formal relationships with teachers, coaches or bosses, as well as interactions with strangers—including strangers who might be threatening, in need, or causing problems.⁴ Youth will encounter such diversity as they navigate different "worlds", from home to school to work to community. It is important for youth, particularly during adolescence, to recognize that these settings often encourage or tolerate different social norms, and learn the language and behaviors that are appropriate for each.⁵

"Help youth develop a disposition that says, 'Okay, I know what my point of view is, but is this how other people are thinking?' Why or why not?"

- Dr. Hunter Gehlbach

One crucial skill for effectively navigating multiple worlds is social perspective-taking, or the ability to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of others. Social perspective-taking is an important social skill that can improve interactions with strangers of different backgrounds, ages or values, but also facilitate effective conflict-resolution with closer relationships. Research at

Harvard's School of Education has shown that youth who are motivated and accurate in their perspective-taking also do better academically.⁶

Psychologist Dr. Hunter Gehlbach urges adults to help youth develop this skill by asking more open-ended questions, encouraging youth to consider multiple points of view.⁷ Challenge youth to think of several right answers for a given situation. Dr. Gehlbach suggests: "Help youth to develop a disposition that says, 'Okay, I know what my point of view is, but is this how other people are thinking?' Why or why not?"⁸

Body language

Non-verbal communication, such as gestures, touch, voice, eye contact and body pose, is oftentimes more important than verbal communication.⁹ In fact, research has shown that communication is 60-90% body language, while only 10-30% verbal.¹⁰ It's important for youth to be aware of

what their non-verbal communication communicates to others. Likewise, learning to accurately interpret others' body language can increase their ability to empathize with others' emotions, thereby positively impacting relationships.

The following discussion questions can help promote youth reflection around non-verbal communication:

1. When talking one-on-one with an adult about a difficult situation, how might the adult interpret direct eye contact versus averting one's eyes? (i.e. A store manager about a job opening, a basketball coach after a tough game, a math teacher about an upcoming test). Share that eye contact can indicate interest, attention, and involvement.
2. What could the following forms of touch communicate? — A firm handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, or a controlling grip on your arm.
3. How can your voice (tone, volume, inflection and speed) communicate confidence, fear, anger or affection?

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Footnotes

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