

The importance of social and emotional learning



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With New York State's increased focus on teacher evaluation and even stronger emphasis on academic outcomes, why should schools pay close attention to social and emotional learning? Social and emotional health – the ability to regulate emotions, form positive relationships, concentrate, problem solve, empathize, and demonstrate pro-social behaviors – is the foundation of a student's successful school experience.

To be able to learn, children need to be able to 1) be aware of themselves and those around them, 2) manage themselves and their emotions, 3) have appropriate relationship skills, and 4) make responsible decisions. This doesn't happen naturally. Just as with learning to read, children need modeling, teaching, and practice.

Academic achievement improves when children are exposed to universal programs that target social and emotional learning. A recent meta-analysis found that students who receive SEL instruction had more positive attitudes about school and improved an average of 11 percentile points on standardized achievement tests compared to students who did not receive such instruction (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

In addition, school-based programs are most effectively conducted by school staff (e.g., teachers, student support staff) indicating that they can be incorporated into routine educational practice.

There are multiple avenues for schools to learn more about programs, practices and training that strengthen social and emotional learning in their districts. Although many programs exist, it is important to look for programs that have a strong research base and have proven effective. In NYS, Children's Institute www.childrensinstitute.net is a leader in helping schools identify programs that meet the needs at the whole school level (universal programs) as well as specific programs that screen for social and emotional competencies. Further, Children's Institute works with schools to implement programs to serve children just beginning to show signs of difficulties and provides training for educational staff to infuse these concepts into everyday practice. At the national level, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) www.casel.org is a leader working at the legislation and policy level to impact change so that social and emotional learning is an essential part of children's educational experience.

For example, Channing-Bete's PATHS® curriculum is a universal program for promoting behavioral and social competencies and reducing aggression and behavior problems in young

children, while simultaneously enhancing the educational process in the classroom. With two certified PATHS® trainers on staff, Children's Institute has provided implementation consultation and training to schools in the Rochester City School District, and in Greece and Rush-Henrietta, as well as to child-centered organizations in the greater Rochester area.

Children's Institute's evidence-based early intervention program, Primary Project, screens and identifies children who are exhibiting school adjustment difficulties. Matched with a caring adult child associate, Primary Project children attend weekly play sessions and work with their child associate to increase their self-confidence, regulate their emotions, problem solve, and address other behaviors that interfere with academic learning.

To learn more about programs described here, contact Debbie Johnson at djohnson@childrensinstitute.net or (585) 295-1000

Children's Institute is a national not-for-profit organization that works to improve the lives of children by strengthening their social and emotional health. The Institute is affiliated with the University of Rochester and has served the community for over 50 years.



ABOVE: Rochester and Rush-Henrietta students participating in PATHS activities led by consultants from Children's Institute.