

## **Teaching and Learning Social-Emotional Skills, Knowledge and Beliefs: Guidelines**

*Overview/Rationale:* Purposively teaching children core social emotional skills, knowledge and beliefs is one of the two organizing principles of effective social emotional/character educational work. Creating safer, more caring, participatory and responsive schools, homes, and communities [link to this section if reader clicks here] is other organizing principles of effective social emotional/character educational work.

The purpose of these guidelines is to summarize organizing guidelines that support parents and school personnel to purposively teach children these essential skills, knowledge and beliefs as well as to detail what the core social emotional competencies are. Consider for a moment what you hope your son or daughter and/or student will understand and “be” when they graduate from high school. What is most important to you as a parent and/or an educator? Having asked this question to parents and educators from around the world, we typically hear the following kinds of responses:

That he/she will be a life long learner; that he/she will be able to do all that they can’ that he/she will have good friends and be a good friend; that he/she will be a responsible and satisfied person; that he/she will be able to love and be loved, all of these ‘dreams’ rest on the person’s social and emotional competencies!

There is a growing body of research that shows that these social and emotional competencies are predictive of children’s ability to learn and to solve problems in non-violent ways. Importantly, these are the same competencies that are predicative of adults’ ability to work effectively as well as to form healthy friendships and enduring intimate relationships (Cohen, 1999 and 2001; Elias, et. al. 1997; Zins, et. al. 2003). For further information about research findings in this area, see our Social Emotional/Character Education Research Data Bank [HYPERLINK TO DATA BANK]

### **What Educators and Counselors can do to promote social emotional/character education in their classrooms and schools?**

- Make social and emotional competencies an explicit and valued goal.
- Eliminate bullying by teaching students to recognize and address bullying, victim and bystander behaviors. Stop the class when you see bullying behavior and discuss the implications. List possible strategies for dealing with the situation.
- Promote tolerance by teaching students to understand issues of diversity.
- Be positive role models for your students.
- Improve awareness and communication, so children are knowledgeable about the warning signs of violence (see Appendix A below) and the importance of telling an adult they see or hear something troubling or scary.



- Promote children’s ability to listen to themselves (being reflective) and others (empathy) and help others (altruism). Listen to your students. Become an active listener and teach children how to be active listeners (see communication capacities)
- Help students feel safe expressing their feelings and build a feelings vocabulary in the classroom. Recognize, honor and talk about your feelings and the feelings of your students. Normalize the fact that we can all become angry, sad or scared. But, we all deal with these moments differently. Talk about what school/classroom environments are necessary for people to feel safe to share their feelings and thoughts.
- Involve and encourage parental involvement in all school activities.
- Integrate interpersonal violence prevention/social emotional education into all subjects and levels.

**What Parents can do to promote SEL in their homes:**

- Be positive role models for your children. Solve problems non-violently. Understand the importance of “walking the talk”.
- Make social and emotional competencies an explicit and valued goal at home.
- Take an active role in your child’s school; talk regularly with teachers and try not to create a split between teachers and parents. Find out your child’s strengths and weaknesses from his/her teachers.
- Help your child understand the value of accepting individual differences.
- Communicate with your children; encourage them to talk about their feelings, concerns and thoughts about violence. Help them understand the consequences of violence.
- Monitor/supervise your child’s use of the Internet, television, reading materials, movies, music and video games. Be aware of what your child is watching and set limits on what you feel is appropriate.
- Seek out support groups to improve parenting skills, anger management and related social emotional education.
- Keep a journal to help you become more self-aware and reflective about your emotional self, and encourage your child to do the same.
- Supervise/know about your child’s extracurricular activities.
- Get to know your child’s friends and where they hang out.



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- Get to know your child's friends' parents. Attend parent association meetings to meet more parents in the school environment.
  - Be available and listen to your child even if what she or he says is painful or difficult to hear.
  - Realize that each child desires to learn and to be understood.
  - Practice skills training and understanding of bullying both at home and in school. Explain why bullying is unacceptable behavior. Discuss possible solutions for dealing with bullies.

#### What Parents and Educators can help children to do:

- Speak out against bullying and offensive behavior.
- Keep a journal to help them become more self-aware and reflective about their emotional selves and how they deal with problems.
- Report incidences of bullying and harassment to caring adults.
- Mentor younger children.
- Talk to a parent or caring adult about violence they may see or experience.
- Be a role model for their peers by refusing to be a victim, passive bystander or bully.
- Become involved in violence prevention activities offered by the school or community.
- Encourage friends who seem depressed or angry to seek help from a parent, teacher, counselor or caring adult.
- Listen to their friends.

#### **Promoting core social and emotional competencies:**

The following are the core social and emotional competencies that parents and educators can promote in the classrooms, and hallways of schools as well as homes. Each of these sections begins with a brief definition and overview of the competencies and guidelines that help children to learn these sets of skills, knowledge and beliefs. The section concludes with a series of examples and tips about teaching and learning each competency.

#### **1) Connecting with ourselves and others:**

Definition and overview: Learning to “connect” or listen to ourselves (reflective capacities) and others (empathic capacities) is the foundation for social-emotional competency (Cohen, . This capacity involves learning to “listen” actively to verbal and non-verbal messages and to think about what they mean. It also means recognizing when we don't understand what



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another person is saying or what we are saying/feeling and thereby, honoring (rather than masking) our confusion. Listening to others and ourselves provides the social-emotional information we need to make decisions, solve conflicts non-violently, cooperate, communicate and form friendships.

Feeling connected to ourselves and others and experiencing self-awareness are the foundations for effective interpersonal violence prevention education for several reasons:

- People who are violent are typically disconnected from themselves. Anger and rage typically grow out of frustration and loss. When children, as well as adults are disconnected with feelings of frustration and loss, they are more likely to act in violent ways.
- When a student is feeling aggressive and vulnerable to acting in violent ways, sensing that others are listening and wanting to understand how he or she is feeling in supportive ways reduces the likelihood that he or she will act violently.
- Students who feel connected to other students are more likely to express support and caring. This is the kind of social environment that discourages violence as a solution to problems. It is also the type of social environment that allows and encourages students to confide in adults regarding a fellow student they may be concerned about.

Guidelines: There are a number of organizing guidelines that can enhance educators' and parents' ability to connect with children.

- Be curious about the child's experience.
- Ask questions to learn more about the child's experience.
- Listen, listen and listen.
- The use of the word "should": there are many moments when it is essential that we let children know what they should and should not do. When children are beginning to express feelings – be it verbally, artistically or otherwise – it is often, inadvertently, unhelpful to tell them that they "should not feel" a certain way.
- Recognize and honor children's experience. We do not need to always agree with and/or not always be pleased with what children say, but it is useful to recognize and honor their experiences.
- The power of an appreciative attitude: With few exceptions, children do the best they can. Even when a child misbehaves, this typically occurs because the child does not think he or she has any other options. An appreciative attitude can powerfully foster our ability to connect with others. Recognizing that children try to do their best enhances their ability to be open to adults' suggestions and comments.
- Confusion and "not knowing": Children have a common belief that it is unacceptable to be confused and/or not know the answer. Although this misunderstanding tends to become more prevalent as children move into middle and high school, it often begins in the first years of school life. Parents and educators have a series of ongoing opportunities to let children know it is normal to be confused and not know the answers. In fact, these are wonderful opportunities to learn something new if we allow ourselves to ask for help.
- When we have difficulty connecting with a child, it may be an important signal that something is amiss. Pay attention to feeling unable to connect. If you are concerned

- about not being able to connect with a child, confer with your school administrator, school counselor and/or other community members who have expertise in these areas.
- Allow children to express even their most angry feelings or most destructive fantasies. Help them to think about these images and ideas by projecting the possible future negative consequences for these actions.

Examples/tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can support our capacity to connect with children and foster social emotional learning to prevent youth violence.

- Ask questions: “How would you feel if you were in that person’s shoes? How are you feeling right now?”
- Acknowledge: “We have a problem. What do you think our goal should be? What are the range of ways we can solve this problem?”
- Learn and listen: “What matters to you? “How can we learn more about that?”
- Tell stories about when you were a boy or girl as well as now: How did you learn these skills, understanding and beliefs? It is very important to include stories about moments when we had trouble learning one or more of these capacities. This gives children permission to talk about what is difficult and/or confusing. As adults, we often shield our children from difficult social-emotional moments in our lives. We don’t want to burden our children. Yet, this can sometimes, inadvertently contribute to children thinking that life is easy for us and we never have problems.
- Make social emotional learning a part of what you do at home and in the classroom: In the classroom, at the dinner table or in the car, there are many moments when we can think about how we are feeling and how the other person is feeling; what is the problem and what is our goal in facing a given decision or problem; what are our options and what would be the best ways to ‘tackle’ this situation; what do I really want to say to that person; how might I cooperate with others; how might I “reach out” to that person who I would like to get to know more?”
- Pay attention to the “match” between the child and the environment (home and/or classroom): We all come into the world with a “biological package” or temperament. Shyness, activity levels, soothability are just a few of the many temperamental dimensions that researchers have learned about in recent years (Kagan,1994). One of the important factors that can inadvertently complicate “connectedness” is when there is a poor match between the environment (home or classroom) and the child’s temperamental disposition. For example, some teachers insist that young children learn to sit still in their classrooms earlier than he or she is ready for. A poor match often contributes to children pulling back and disconnecting.
- Recognize changes: As our children grow physically, socially and emotionally, it is important to recognize and explicitly acknowledge these changes. Recognizing and validating these changes provides a foundation for connectedness. A wonderful way to talk about these kinds of changes is to tell children stories about ourselves when we were children. Sometimes, telling stories about our own changes without explicitly asking or suggesting that they should talk about their own changes allows them to be more comfortable and open up. For example, the passage into adolescence, which often begins well before the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, involves a series of extraordinary physical, mental, social and emotional changes. In conjunction with the very visible physical



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changes that accompany puberty and the new mental capacities that many adolescents show, we often see children becoming more independent and moving away from parents and teachers. However, the need to be connected to others and ourselves is as important as ever.

## 2) Communicative capacities

Definition and Overview: Communicative capacities refer to our ability to express ourselves and be clearly understood and the ability to understand what is being verbally and nonverbally transmitted back. Research has shown that fostering clear communication between children and adults is an important component to interpersonal violence prevention (Pianta, 1999). It contributes to children feeling connected and less isolated from others. How we communicate as a parent and/or an educator becomes the model for how children communicate. Learning to put our feelings into words reduces the likelihood that we will feel frustrated and act aggressively or violently. Learning to communicate clearly and directly includes the ability to use refusal skills, assertiveness, and verbal as well as non-verbal methods to engage in positive behavior. (This is ties in with the NY State Health Skill of advocacy. ) Helping children to acquire observational, listening and other communication skills reduces conflict and helps children to handle problems more easily. If adults use inappropriate expressions and verbal put-downs, children will see these as acceptable forms of communication.

Organizing Guidelines: Communicating clearly and directly is hard work for everyone. Learning to communicate clearly and directly is an ongoing process. Pay attention to how your children communicate and recognize their efforts. Think about what kind of communicator you are: our actions become a model for our children.

Examples and tips: What follows are a number of examples and tips that can aid our efforts to foster this fundamentally important interpersonal violence prevention skill and understanding:

- Learn to listen: Pay attention to what the child/student is saying; find time to be alone with the child; don't interrupt; don't prepare how you will respond to the child while your child is speaking; reserve making judgments, decisions or arriving at conclusions and solutions until the child has finished speaking.
- Look at and observe the child: Be aware of the child's facial expressions and body language. Is the child nervous or uncomfortable or relaxed and happy? Reading these signs will help adults know how the child is feeling and respond more appropriately to the child. During the conversation, acknowledge what the child is saying and move close to the child, make eye contact and nod.
- Encourage respect for individual differences: If you are tolerant of people who are different from you, then the child will be more likely to model your behavior.
- Teach children, beginning at an early age, the importance of learning to say "no" or "time-out" when they feel uncomfortable.
- Respond and Recognize: Use "I-statements" to let the child know how YOU feel about what he or she is saying. Speak for yourself and do try to put words into the child's mouth. Identify when it is important for you to tell the child what you believe about a topic/issue or when it would be better for him or her to figure out

what he or she believes without your opinion. I-messages are simple, powerful ways to communicate our wants, needs and feelings. By teaching children to use these messages, you are giving them tools to help them in situations where they need to feel empowered and listened to. Sometimes, it may be helpful to teach children about the 5 steps to an I-message.

### **Five Steps to an “I” Message**

1. Always begin the statement with “I”. “I” puts the focus on your feelings, wants and needs. “You” puts the other person on the defensive.
2. Clearly and simply say how you feel.
3. Clearly and simply say what the other person did (or is doing) that makes you feel that way.
4. Clearly and simply say why you feel the way you do.
5. Clearly and simply say what you want or need the other person to do.

### **Here are a few examples of “I statements”**

- “I feel disappointed when you stay out past your curfew. Please explain to me why you came home late.”
- “I feel frustrated that you did not write your English paper that was due today. I want you to hand in your next assignment on time.”

### **3) Impulse Control/Anger Management (Self-Management and Stress Management)**

Definition and Overview: Impulse control and anger management refers to our ability to recognize when we are feeling impulsive and/or angry and manage these urges in appropriate, non-violent ways. Research has shown that learning how to control one’s impulses will reduce violent behavior (Guerra, in press). Anger is one of the most difficult emotions for children to manage. When children are angry, it is difficult for them to think clearly and make appropriate choices. This is why it is an important violence prevention strategy for children – beginning in the pre-Kindergarten years -- to learn about and practice impulse control and anger management. Research has shown that learning to control impulses at an early age reduces the likelihood of aggressive-violent behavior in adolescence (Zigler, Styfco, & Gilman, 1993).

Organizing Guidelines: Learning to control our impulses rests on our ability to recognize our emotional state, to contain these impulses and find safe and appropriate ways to express them. It is important for children to understand that it is okay to feel angry or impulsive. However, children need to learn that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to express these impulses. It is also useful for children to gradually learn that anger typically stems from frustration and/or loss.

Examples and tips: What follows are a series of ideas, examples and tips that can further your ability to help children learn to recognize and manage their impulses:

- Label emotions: your own and others. This helps children to develop a feelings vocabulary. If we can talk about our feelings, it is easier to recognize and manage them.
- Practice recognizing the physical signs or cues that accompany anger and other strong impulses. For example, the following questions can spur important discussion and discovery about this: How does your body feel when you are angry? What do your hands do? What does your face do? How does your voice sound? Do you walk, sit or stand differently?
- Talk about “ok” and “not so ok” ways to express strong impulses.
- Help children understand that anger typically grows out of frustration and/or hurt.
- Each classroom and home should engage in conversations like, “What do you want me to do when I am feeling angry or hurt?”
- Talk about the various ways that we manage feeling frustrated and hurt, both helpful and unhelpful ways.
- When a child is angry it is important to acknowledge his or her feelings. For example, “I can see you are angry.” “It looks like you are pretty angry/mad about...” This is important because many children calm down quickly when they realize someone recognizes how they are feeling.
- To help children understand what triggers anger, you can ask them to make statements like: “I get angry when...”
- We can and need to teach children how to “keep calm.” Generate a list of ways that the child can stay calm. Refer to the list when the child gets angry. Here is an example of our one method of helping young children learn in this area:

***Ballooning and Draining:*** This cooling off technique includes deep breathing and muscle relaxation:

1. Ballooning is deep breathing. Have the child stand and tell him/her to take slow breaths and fill himself with air as if they were balloons. Then have them slowly let the air out of the “balloons”. Repeat a few times and have the children tell how they feel.
2. Draining is consciously tensing and relaxing the muscles in the body. Again, have the child stand and ask him/her to tighten all of the muscles in their body and hold them tight until you say relax. After a few seconds, say, “Now relax and let all of the anger drain out of you. Imagine a puddle of anger at your feet.”
3. Ask the child: how did it feel when you finished ballooning/draining? When can you use this method again? How could you use this method in a less obvious way?

Here is an example of a technique that can be useful for older children:

Close your eyes and imagine you are in one of your favorite places. As you breathe in, feel positive energy entering your body through the top of your head. As you breathe out, feel all of the tension leaving your body through the bottom



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of your feet. Release all anxiety and tension. As you breathe in feel the positive energy filling your entire body from head to toe. As you breathe out, let all of the tension go out of your body. When you experience stress, this is a good tool to help you feel better.

#### 4) Problem Solving and Decision Making

Definition and Overview: Life involves a series of decisions and problems. How we solve problems and make choices shapes our lives and our ability to handle conflicts in non-violent ways (Aber, et. al., 1996; Elias & Tobias, 1996; Huesmann, Guerra, Miller, & Zelli, 1992; Selman, Beardslee, Schultz, Krupa, & Podoresky, 1986). Flexible and healthy decision making and problem solving involves engaging in a process of weighing options and consequences and coming to a conclusion that will result in positive and productive behavior. This competency includes the ability to develop and implement a plan, evaluate successes and barriers and revise the plan to accomplish the objectives effectively.

Organizing Guidelines: There are helpful and unhelpful ways to solve problems and make decisions. It is useful to teach children the steps that characterize flexible and creative problem solving and decision-making.

A primary approach in learning to solve problems and to enhance decision-making abilities in children is to use a specific model. It is important to remember that for children to use this model, adults should be modeling this behavior and technique in their everyday life. Here is one example of an effective tool for problem solving and decision-making and planning:

1. Make a clear statement of what the problem is. Define the problem.
2. Consider possible solutions to the problem. What can we do to fix it?
3. Test and evaluate these conclusions and arrive at a solution.
4. Take action and implement the best solution.
5. Evaluate the results of the action. Did the plan work?

Example and Tips: Here are some examples and tips that may support your teaching children these essential violence prevention skills, understanding and beliefs:

- Talk about “good” and “not so good” problems: normalize the notion that life is a series of problems and decisions and that the key issue is how can we become flexible and creative problem solvers.
- Talk about times when we did not solve problems so well. This can allow children to reflectively consider their own helpful and not so helpful problem solving strategies.
- Underscore the importance for learning to recognize our emotional state and to “keep calm.” This is one of the foundations for helpful problem solving abilities.
- Be a learner with child(ren): Whatever happens when they (or we) are faced with a problem/decision can become a teachable moment, an opportunity to reflect and think about how we might have managed this if we could “rewind.”
- Appreciate and practice goal setting, the first critical stage in the problem solving process. How we (automatically or thoughtfully) set goals is important. Goals drive behavior.

- One of very important decisions that children make pertains to what are acceptable and unacceptable ways to settle disputes. Researchers have found that it is especially important to help middle school children (ages 6 to 11) learn about this (Huesmann, Guerra, Miller, & Zelli, 1992; Selman, Beardslee, Schultz, Krupa, & Podoresky, 1986). Helping middle school children to understand that it is not necessary to use physical force to settle disputes and to develop related skills and knowledge about how to manage interpersonal disputes is an important step in violence prevention.

## 5) Cooperative Capacities

Definition and Overview: Cooperating refers to our capacity to work together in pairs and groups. Being able to listen, to take turns and to develop collaborative goals and strategies to accomplish these goals is an essential set of skills and knowledge that provides the foundation for this ability. Research has shown that cooperation is a core competency that allows us to develop healthy friendships and positive relationships throughout life (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

When children cooperate, they learn to appreciate the strengths and differences of each classmate and/or family member. They also learn to wait and take turns. This creates an atmosphere of acceptance, tolerance and respect. When children play and work together, the environment is less competitive because the goal of cooperation is success of the group/family rather than the individual.

Organizing Guidelines: Being able to cooperate is pleasurable and meaningful. It is also hard work. The capacity to cooperate rests on a number of social and emotional skills and understandings that include active listening; impulse control and the ability to taking turns; learning to identify and set goals; learning to appreciate what others are thinking and doing; learning to contribute new ideas; being able to ask for help, helping others and learning to accept help; taking responsibility for one's actions; and, working toward a shared goal.

Examples and Tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can further our ability to teach and learn about this core competency:

- When we have a cooperative opportunity, acknowledge this. Be explicit about cooperation as an important and sometimes, difficult process.
- Encourage children to ask for help when they are having a problem in an interaction. Asking for help is not an admission of failure, but it identifies that there is a problem that needs to be solved.
- Ask: What is the problem? What have you tried to do to solve the problem already? How do you want me to help?
- Children are anxious to put blame on someone for a problem. Encourage them to look at the situation as a problem to be solved rather than a question of who is to blame. If the child sees that you do not put value on "fault," then it will not be an issue in the future.
- Suggest possible solutions when the child is stuck but try to give the child choices so that he/she feels empowered.

- After a cooperative exercise or experience, talk about what it was like. What was easy? What was difficult? How can we learn from this?

## 6) Forming Friendships

Definition and overview: The ability to form friendships rests on many other social and emotional competencies: being able to listen to ourselves and the other person; being able to control our impulses; being able to communicate and cooperate. Research has shown that forming friendships is essential for children's healthy development and happiness (Guerra, in press; Parker, et. al, 1995). Friendships provide a needed sense of belonging for children and adults alike. Friends offer security and support and are important in times of difficulties and rough spots in life. Without friends, individuals can develop negative, anti-social behaviors. Researchers have re-affirmed the importance of a stable peer group in early adolescence (ages 12 to 14) (Allen, Weissberg, & Hawkins, 1989). To what extent this group is primary prosocial or antisocial affects the probability of aggressive and violent behavior. Positive, supportive friendships permit children to deal effectively with risky and negative life situations.

A key factor in helping children build friendships is understanding why the child likes or dislikes interacting and playing with another child. What do the children like to do together? Who is the leader and who is the follower? Do they prefer one-on-one interactions or enjoy group play more often?

Organizing Guidelines: Learning to be a friend is one of the most important capacities we can develop. We need to help children value good friendships and develop the skills and understandings that provide the platform for healthy, supportive and caring relationships. Being a friend is fun, however, as children move into the elementary school years, being a friend also takes time and energy.

Examples and Tips: What follows are a series of examples and tips that can further our ability to teach and learn about this core competency:

- Learn who the child's friends are.
- Get to know the parents/caregivers of the children.
- Talk about the importance of friendship and the pleasure of getting to know all different kinds of people in the world.
- Provide the child with an opportunity to get to know his or her friend in your home.
- Help the child assess the negative and positive qualities of his or her friendships.
- Encourage open communication about the friendships.
- Encourage the child to be an "individual" and to not try to "be like" his or her friends.
- Help the child to learn to say "no" in a friendship while still maintaining the friendship.
- Help the child learn when the friendship is unhealthy and harmful to his or her self-esteem.

## 7) Recognizing and Appreciating Diversity and Differences

Definition and overview: Younger children are trying to build an understanding of the world around them. Their interest in exploring who they are makes them aware of the differences and similarities in others around them. They may notice gender, age, color or physical differences in people.

Children are often victimized by peers because of their sexual orientation or their confusion about their sexual or gender identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth who attend both public and independent schools are often harassed relentlessly and sometimes physically attacked. (Human Rights Watch, 2001)

By learning to acknowledge differences without bias, children help to create an environment where each child can feel comfortable about his or her differences and feel safe taking risks, or being an individual in a group.

Some skills associated with appreciating differences are identifying differences and similarities in a nonjudgmental way; using appropriate language to acknowledge or ask questions about differences; learning to be assertive or to stand up for themselves or others; building empathy about others' feelings. Differences can lead to conflict. Children need to learn to appreciate human differences as enriching, rather than threatening. The more children understand about prejudice and discrimination, the more they will be able to resist prejudice themselves.

Organizing Guidelines: Both children and adults make pre-judgments (prejudice) about others. It is useful to recognize how and when we do this. It is important to learn that if someone is different this does not mean that they are 'bad.' People who are different often evoke anxiety and fear. Teasing and bullying are one way that some children negatively manage this anxiety and fear.

Tips and examples: Some tips for building these skills:

- Acknowledge differences: The more children hear that adults are comfortable with differences and the more you discuss this with respect and ease, the more they will be able to accept differences.
- Recognize that one common reaction to the other person being different is anxiety.
- Use culturally diverse teaching materials: Post pictures around the classroom that depict people from diverse backgrounds interacting with each other. It is also helpful to post pictures of people with a variety of body types or physical abilities.
- Create diverse groups: Make a conscious effort to put children from different backgrounds in small groups together. Research has shown that working in small, cooperative groups is an effective way to help young people overcome fears and stereotypes (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).
- Involve families in your curriculum: Celebrate different holidays and traditions in your classroom and have the people from each religion/culture explain the holiday/tradition to the class.

- Foster inclusion: Take time to celebrate each child as an important member of the group.

## 8) Altruistic capacities:

Definition and overview: Altruistic capacities refers to people's inclination to be concerned about and helpful towards others.

### Organizing Guidelines:

The capacity and inclination to be helpful towards others is one of the organizing goals for all violence prevention and social-emotional/character education efforts. It is important to remember that empathy can be used in helpful (e.g. altruistic) or unhelpful (anti-social) ways. For example, when a child empathizes with someone who has inadvertently hurt his or her feelings, it promotes essential SEL capacities like maintaining friendships. But, when children learn to empathize with the ability to manipulate their peers, this undermines friendships and trust. As is the case with all of the core social-emotional competencies described here, the capacity to be altruistic is shaped by a constellation of social-emotional skills, knowledge and values. For example, to be altruistic, children need to be able to actively listen to others, to empathize and reflect and to be creative social-emotional problem solvers. Children need to understand that healthy social relations rest on our helping as well as being helped by others. And, the belief or value that helping others is a social responsibility supports the development of this core social-emotional competency.

Like all competencies, altruism and the capacity to act in prosocial ways develops over time. Altruistic behaviors have been observed in children as young as 2 years of age. As maturation results in new capacities, children's abilities in these areas blossom. For example, when verbal skills develop in the early elementary school years, children's ability to understand others, to "connect" and to help others enhances. In early adolescence the development of greater abstract capacities (which enhances our ability put ourselves in "the other persons shoes") dramatically promotes their ability to empathize with others and thereby, be helpful to others.

Examples and tips: Below are examples and tips to aid our efforts to build altruistic capacities in children.

- Be a role model! How do you show that you are helpful to others? Talk about this. There is pleasure in helping others. Let you children or students discover this themselves
- Provide opportunities for older children to help younger children (i.e. mentoring programs).
- Talk about the pleasures of giving and receiving help. To the extent that there is a balance in our lives, both are important and pleasurable facets of life.
- Discuss world and local events to identify concrete ways for children to express concern, and help others.
- Encourage community service and provide opportunities for children to feel and be responsible for others and the environment, e.g., community trash cleanup, raking leaves for old people/neighbors etc.
- When a classmate/friend is absent due to illness, provide help by having a classmate call, take projects to the child, or make a visit.



- Discuss bullying and the importance of children standing together to assist the victim, AND to help the bully change behaviors.
- Foster altruistic class projects: e.g. class to adopt an orphan in a third world country and raise money for them and correspond regularly.
- Discuss ways to orient new children and teachers to the school/neighborhood, and to improve acceptance and welcoming of diversity and tolerance i.e. helping others who are different to become comfortable in the school group/community. This can be a way of introducing broader issues relating to prejudice and diversity.
- Introduce a regular time for reflection on these matters in the classroom and at home (e.g. the dinner table).

### *Credit:*

These guidelines were written by the Center for Social and Emotional Education (Jennifer Allen, Jonathan Cohen and Lauren Hyman) and peer reviewed by the following individuals:

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This material became an organizing center for the New York State Project Save related legislation: [Interpersonal Violence Prevention Educational Guidelines 2002 \[CLICK HERE TO LINK TO THESE GUIDELINES\]](#)

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