Common Understandings about Social Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning

The social, emotional, cognitive and physical aspects of a person's development are interrelated. Each influences, and is influenced by the others. Consequently, it is not uncommon for students who have difficulty managing their emotions and behaviour, to face great challenges meeting the demands of schooling. This relationship between student behaviour and academic problems is not always clear in terms of which comes first, but what is clear is that the presence of one greatly increases the risk of the other. Supporting children's emotional, social and behavioural development thus enables them to more effectively engage in their learning.

The Friendly Schools Plus teacher resources are designed to address three key aspects of students' school experiences shown to be related to improved social and emotional development: promoting

positive peer relationships, promoting positive teacher-child relationships and explicit teaching related to emotions, social knowledge and social skills. The resource aims to develop students' social and emotional competencies to enable them to recognise and control their emotions, build positive relationships, show consideration for others, make thoughtful and sensible choices and cope successfully with difficult situations. These outcomes are developed through the following five key areas in this resource:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Social decision-making

Bullying can have a significant and negative impact on students' social and emotional development and other learning. An anxious, frightened and withdrawn student has limited learning potential.

To reduce and ultimately prevent bullying it is important to focus on why most children and young people do not engage in bullying behaviour. These individuals tend to display greater social and emotional competence than those who bully others. Children and adolescents who demonstrate social and emotional competence are also more likely to have positive relationships and social capabilities that reduce the likelihood of them being bullied. In addition, in the event that they are victimised or a bystander in a bullying incident they are more aware of how to manage the bullying situation.

Bullying is more than an event between students who bully and students who are bullied. It is a social relationship involving group values and group standards of behaviour, which means it requires consistent action across the school community to achieve positive change.

In the Australian Curriculum1, students develop personal and social capabilities as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for and understanding of others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams and handling challenging situations constructively.

Students with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, develop resilience and a sense of self-worth, resolve conflict, engage in teamwork and feel positive about themselves and the world around them. The development of personal and social capability is a foundation for learning and for citizenship.

What is social and emotional learning?

Social and emotional learning is the process of developing and practising important social and emotional understandings and skills.[2] These understandings and skills can be grouped into five key areas (see Figure 4).

Self-awareness skills help us to recognise and understand our feelings, while valuing our strengths and abilities. This involves:

- Being able to identify what we are feeling
- Understanding why we might feel a certain way
- Recognising and having confidence to use our strengths and abilities

Self-management skills enable us to handle and direct our emotions in appropriate ways. This involves:

- Managing our emotions so they don't stop us from effectively dealing with situations and pursuing our goals
- Striving to achieve our goals despite difficulties

Social awareness skills help us to be aware and respectful of the feelings and perspectives of others. This involves:

- Recognising what others may be feeling
- Trying to understand a situation from another's point of view
- Accepting and valuing people who are different from ourselves

Relationship skills help us to deal positively with relationship problems and other social conflicts. These skills include:

- Making friends and maintaining healthy relationships
- Dealing effectively with negative social influences and conflicts
- Seeking help if we are not able to solve a social problem ourselves

Social decision-making skills help us to consider the consequences of our actions for ourselves and others, and make thoughtful, effective decisions. This involves:

- Understanding how a social situation makes us feel
- Considering the different choices we have and the positive and negative consequences of each of these choices when making a decision
- Making positive choices, while considering how these choices may affect ourselves and others[3]

Personal and social capability skills are addressed in all learning areas and at every stage of a student's schooling.

Figure 4: Five social and emotional learning skills

The Australian Curriculum states that when students develop their skills in any one of these elements, it leads to greater overall personal and social capability, and also enhances their skills in the other elements. In particular, the more students learn about their own emotions, values, strengths and capacities, the more they are able to manage their own emotions and behaviours, and to understand others and establish and maintain positive relationships.