

Social and Emotional Wellbeing for Learning

Dr Kathryn Murray and Gloria van Donge, Australia.

Have you been in a situation where someone talks incessantly as a monologue? Have you had difficulty controlling your emotions, had no interest in talking to someone or no inclination to take a risk and try something new? Does it seem like everyone else has relationships that thrive, and you don't?

In our experience with children and adults, we have found that some people naturally 'read the room', regulate their emotions, build strong relationships, make good decisions, and feel good about themselves. Having a strong sense of social and emotional wellbeing leads to better opportunities for learning.

Socially and emotionally stable children come to school prepared to learn. In 2005, research suggested that happiness is determined 50% by our genes, 10% by our life circumstances and 40% by our life choices and behaviours. Whilst more recent research debates these percentages, the premise remains that we can influence our happiness. It would follow that as parents and teachers it is crucial to teach and encourage children to develop strategies for life that will support a strong sense of social and emotional wellbeing that provides opportunity for greater happiness.

There is a solid link between social and emotional development and mental health. Building opportunities for social and emotional wellbeing (SEW) and social and emotional learning (SEL) have been shown to decrease the rates of depression, suicide, eating disorders, stress, antisocial behaviour and the like. A positive sense of self, developed through SEW and SEL activities, has been linked to adult productivity, success and happiness. Building competence in social and emotional wellbeing provides a firm platform for the development of social and emotional learning. Children feel good about themselves so are willing to take a risk in their learning: they have a go at that mathematics problem, ask for help to complete an activity, and bounce back when something is completed incorrectly.

Classroom and family discussions that lead to the development of strong mental health begin by giving descriptive feedback, identifying emotions or using a story to begin conversations about characters and feelings. Developing self-awareness, self-management, social connections, and acceptance of self are all part of the journey to wellbeing and learning. Embracing social and emotional wellbeing leads to higher social cohesion within families, classrooms and communities in general, which in turn builds social capital and positive futures for children.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) and **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** are the cornerstones of rich learning in cognitive, physical and language developmental domains. The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified 5 core goals for development of wellbeing in our schools. The goals highlight the importance of social and emotional wellbeing and learning and what it might look like in our classrooms.

1. **Self-awareness** — identifying and recognising emotions; recognising personal interests and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
2. **Self-management** — regulating emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and motivate oneself to persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward the achievement of personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately
3. **Social awareness** — being able to take the perspective of others and empathise with them; recognising and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences

4. **Relationship skills** — establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation and resistance to inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and constructively resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed
5. **Responsible decision-making** — making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant factors, including applicable ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms; the likely consequences of taking alternative courses of action; evaluation and reflection.

Why we need to teach SEW and SEL:

Students lacking in SEW or SEL may find it difficult to follow directions, self-regulate their emotions, or interact with others. Social and emotional skills are key determinants of academic success and productivity in the classroom. Research indicates that students behind in their SE development are:

- Up to 80% more likely to need a repeat year
- 80% more likely to require learning intervention and support
- And seven times more likely to exhibit difficult behaviour.

A clear outcome from this research is that SEW and SEL are highlighted as being vital to establish positive approaches to individual learning and set students up for success. The Student Learning and Wellbeing framework developed by Education Queensland reminds us of the World Health Organisation's statement that "Wellbeing is a state in which every individual realises his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". With this in mind, the importance of SEW and SEL is evident for all students, but particularly gifted and talented students who may require further support to understand their unique approaches to the world.

One way to support students, is to **use resources** that explore the range of social and emotional competencies that are needed to strengthen and support self-awareness and acceptance of personal strengths and challenges. The Gifted Kid Book Series does this in a gentle, entertaining, child friendly manner. The concepts found in each book align with the desired outcomes of education systems worldwide that identify the importance of embracing diversity and the World Health Organisation's promotion of wellbeing.

Gifted children are good at camouflaging their strengths so they don't seem 'different'. Perhaps you have a gifted child in your class or even your family and don't realise it.

In your class or school, do you have children who:

- Seem bored with school, so are disruptive?
- You think can do better than they do?
- Challenge ideas and offer different solutions?
- Constantly ask questions to the point of frustration?

Have you considered that they may be gifted?

Perhaps you have noticed that they:

- Excel in sports, dance, music, maths, or English
- Seem to be very serious and older than their years
- Learn quickly and retain what is learnt
- Think of innovative and creative ways to approach a standard problem

- Set unrealistically high standards for themselves
- Have intense emotions and seem very sensitive to the feelings of others.

All children are to be encouraged to find their own level of SEW which then allows them to access SEL. This is particularly important with children who see themselves as 'different' from other children. This is the case with gifted children. The level of social and emotional wellbeing and building strong relationships may be difficult depending on the particular characteristics of the gifted child. The various forms of giftedness and the accommodations made by the gifted child is not in the scope of this paper, but is worth considering for future publications.

Who is Dr Kathryn Murray?

Dr Kathryn Murray is the founder of Future Strong Education, a consultancy business working with teachers, leadership teams, early childhood educators, organisations and parents. Kathy has a professional background that spans 36 years in the education sector. Her aim is to extend each person's personal and professional capabilities by sharing current research and a range of experiences gathered over her career. Kathy speaks at conferences, provides professional development sessions and mentors clients nationally and internationally while continuing to share her expertise with pre-service teachers at Central Queensland University. The life aim of 'making a difference in the lives of children' is what fuels Kathy's passion to provide support in the world of education.

Kathy's qualifications include: Doctor of Education, Master of Education, Certificate IV in Training and Assessing, Bachelor of Education, Diploma of Teaching (Preschool/Primary).

Who is Gloria van Donge?

Gloria van Donge is a mother of a gifted child, but she only discovered this in her retirement! If only she had known earlier when her children were small. To help other parents and educators, Gloria has written five picture books to create a doorway into the world of the gifted and talented child. Her stories cover pertinent issues like acceptance, camouflaging behaviour, perfectionism, being out-of-sync with peers and emotional giftedness. As an international author, it is her hope that these stories will generate discussion and contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of the gifted. Gloria's qualifications include Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Arts in Biblical Studies.

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