

Social and Emotional Development Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello, I am ANNMARIE MCMAHILL with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, and this is the ParentingMontana.org podcast. In this podcast, we'll be learning from an expert in the field about social and emotional development, what it means, its importance and some examples of how to grow these skills for your child's success.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

We don't stop developing socially and emotionally, it starts when you're born, and it keeps going, because social and emotional development is really about how do we get along in life? How do we interact with other people? How do we organize ourselves to get things done?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL

I'd like to introduce our guest for today's podcast, Dr. Maurice Elias is one of the pioneers of social and emotional development. He's a professor in the psychology department at Rutgers University, Director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, and Co-director of the Academy for SEL in Schools. He's also a pioneer and founding member of the leadership team for CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. He's written Emotionally Intelligent Parenting, Talking Treasure: Stories to Help Build Emotional Intelligence and Resilience in Young Children, The Joys & Oys of Parenting and Nurturing Students' Character: Everyday Teaching Activities for Social-Emotional Learning. He blogs on social and emotional development at edutopia.org, and he lectures nationally and internationally.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well, let's start today by having you explain a little bit more of what is meant by social and emotional development.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

I should preface this by saying, I have a new granddaughter who is three months plus old, so this gives me a perspective on seeing how everything develops. You see her physical development, you see her social development and how she engages with her parents and with other people. You see her, you see her emotional development, how she is able to control herself, and, and so when you have the privilege of watching, uh, a newborn, especially as a grandparent, um, you just see everything develops, and of course that includes your social and emotional person.

Um, and, and of... and we don't stop developing socially and emotionally, i- it starts when you're born, and we... it keeps going, because social and emotional development is really about how do we get along in life? How do we interact with other people? How do we organize ourselves to get things done? Um, all of that depends on, on aspects of our social and emotional development, and so, uh, so these are, uh, skills that everybody, uh, starts with and... that we want to develop over time, so that people can handle situations, manage well, um, you know, live a productive and constructive life and deal with other people and know how to do that. So that's kind of, uh, you know, that's kind of what social and emotional development is about, it's, it's critically important to everybody.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What do you think some things, um, that parents might misunderstand about social and emotional development?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, you know, I think sometimes, uh, people think in terms of character, and they think that certain things are inborn, that, you know, "My kid's a certain kind of kid," and, then that's just the way they are, but in reality, uh, we have... we, we come, we come out with like these different factory presets. You know, some kids are indeed calmer than others, and some kids are indeed more active than others, but all of these things can be modified over time by the way we treat kids and the way they interact with the world. So I think one, um, misconception that parents have, is the extent to which social and emotional development is about skills that you can learn.

So, for example, you can learn how to calm yourself down when you're upset, and another important skill that kids actually learn is empathy, uh, it is not something that, you know, whether you're empathic or not is inborn, uh, it's something that over time, uh, we help kids learn, in part by our modeling, our own modeling as parents, and also by how we encourage kids to respond when they see other people in distress. And here's another important skill, and that is the ability to recognize how others are feeling. Now I've talked to parents who said, "You know, sometimes my kids will come over to me when I'm very upset, and they'll ask me for something and I'll say to them, "Don't you see the look on my face? Don't you see my neck vein bulging out of my, my side here?" And the answer to the question is, no, they don't see that because they haven't been taught to look at it.

And so, yes, indeed, if we are taught to look at other people's faces, look at their body language and expression, we can infer a lot about them, but if we are not taught to do that and not encouraged to do that, well, then we don't do it, and so then people... we end up thinking that people feel the way we want them to feel, well, that's not, that's not a good idea for good long-term relationships, you gotta know how people are feeling by being observant, and, and this is a skill that develops over to time. So, so, you know, no matter where we look in social and emotional development, um, there are things that,

uh, teachers and other educators and coaches and parents do that influence the, the track that their kids are on.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well, I think for me as a parent, that... realizing that it is a s... that you're talking about skills that can be developed, it gives me an opportunity to rest into the fact that I have control over the outcome (laughs) of, of my, my child's success, and I really can access tools to grow their skills and, and grow their successes, so-

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Right.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

... I think for me, understanding that part of social and emotional development, made me take a deep breath in my parenting, because I... it's a process, and it's a, it's a process learned over a lifetime, um-

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Right.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

... rather than, rather than an aspect of them that- that's born.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Yeah, you know, you know, here's something very interesting that, uh... and, and I'm, I'm speaking now as a licensed clinical psychologist. So, so when kids seem to be having a very difficult time, they end up being brought to a therapist and, and what happens in therapy? Well, the therapist in, in essence re... helps the kid relearn and learn new skills, and so, so it's so funny that when kids have difficulty, we desperately hope that they can learn new skills, but yet until they have difficulty, sometimes we don't think that we have to teach them those skills, and, you know, for me, it's all about prevention.

I actually stopped seeing kids clinically because I was much more interested in spending time strengthening kids so that they wouldn't need to see clinicians, and turns out that, uh, that the things that you do when a child is in therapy are really the same things that you can do when they're, when they're younger to teach those skills, um, but yet it, it seems more, uh, I don't know, sort of acceptable, or... I'm not sure what the right word is, it's just something that we, we do when the kids have difficulty, um, but we are a little more reluctant to do when they don't have difficulty.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So let's go back and talk a little bit about what brought you here, so when did you realize social and emotional development was gaining traction for you, or when did you realize that this is where you wanted to spend a, a career?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, you know, it actually occurred as part of my own clinical training. Um, I was an intern in a child and family treatment center in Hartford, Connecticut, which is an urban setting, and, uh, and you know, when you're an intern, very often, you're invisible. You-you'll sit in a room and the staff members will talk as if you're not there, and this happened to me all the time. And I was listening to staff members coming back after their sessions with families, and they were saying, "If only the parents had done this, if only the school had done that, if only this, if only that," and I'm listening and I'm saying, "Well, why couldn't these things happen? Why are we saying if only."

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Uh, and so I began to think about how... if we move upstream, so to speak, and see why the problems are getting downstream, and, and, and look at the causes, that we can have an impact, and so I found myself gravitating more toward prevention than treatment, and, and that's kind of what got me started. And then, um, I had the good fortune to work with, uh, two individuals, George Spivack and Myrna Shure-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... uh, to whom I'm so indebted uh, as a professional, um, who, who began to understand that when kids were getting into psychological difficulty like depression, like anxiety, like oppositional defiant disorder behavior, that, that the reason for that was, that they were not applying social and emotional skills. And so, uh, they began and encouraged me to begin to work early in life with kids and, and begin to follow a progression of how are we gonna help kids learn these skills early in life and keep teaching it to them as they become middle schooler, adolescents, college students, parents, etc, etc.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So along the way, have you had any big surprises that you've learned in the study of social and emotional development?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, I think what we've, uh... what was surprising to me, was the extent to which these, uh, these competencies can be learned. Uh, I, I, I, I admit that my, my initial reaction, and maybe it was just because of my training and, and, and... I don't know, just, maybe

we're all just brought up thinking in terms of people's traits, and traits always seem very hard to change, and, you know, and, and how many of us have grown up with people, maybe our parents or grandparents and say, "Oh, they... this is the way they are, this is the way they're always gonna be." So, you know, it all gets into all of us, I think, but I began to see, by starting to work with our young kids, how receptive, uh, they are to learning all kinds of things, including how to treat each other, uh, well and nicely.

Um, so much of what happens with our kids depends on our expectations for them. If we expect our kids to treat... siblings, for example, if we expect our siblings to treat each other kindly with compassion and, and we are absolutely clear that, that sibling fighting, physical fighting is just not acceptable, um, vast majority of the time you find kids that... siblings that will start to treat each other well, and they don't beat each other up.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Right.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Um, now again, because sometimes when people are brought up in certain circumstances, like maybe you're brought up fighting with your sibling, you, you figure, well, it's just an inevitability, um, but it's not an inevitability, and, uh, and, and if we set about to teach our kids, uh, certain, uh, competencies in, in the way they get along with each other, we can be successful a lot of the time. So I was surprised about that, um, uh, pleasantly so, and then that, you know, then that morphed into my work in schools, where, uh, where it began to be clear that the way we set up the school environment and what we expect from kids becomes very important in how they engage with each other, and, you know, I s... the more time I spent in schools, the more I realized that what happens in a school, academically, depends on what the kids are doing socially and emotionally.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

The idea that kids are gonna walk into a school building, 180 school days, and as soon as the bell rings, they're ready to learn, it's not very realistic.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Some of the kids are coming from dan- dangerous neighborhoods, some of the kids are coming from difficult home situations, kids are now are coming from homes that are directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19 pandemic, so to think that they're

automatically ready to start learning just as soon as the bell rings, that- that's not a good assumption. So if we help our kids, um, just kind of get their emotions set before the start of the school day or before we really delve into instruction, we're gonna find that they become much more receptive, and in fact, learn more, they forget less, which means we can make more progress, academically, with the kids, um, but the only way to do that is by being attentive to where they're at socially and emotionally.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So is, is that what brought you to the place to write Emotionally Intelligent Parenting?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, honestly, what brought me to that place was my work, uh, with my two colleagues, Brian Friedlander, and Steve Tobias as clinicians, and, and, and we were having this if-only experience. We were saying... so, so here, when, when people come to us in therapy, we're doing this social skills teaching and social and emotional development instruction, well, why can't we just move that up and help parents understand this, um, when they're first having their kids. So that's really what the book consists of, it's sort of like an early warning system, uh-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... for parents, "Here are the things you can do so you're less likely to have your kids run into trouble," and, and it's all based on what happens in everyday routines. You know, it's not like parents are gonna, you know, get up with a chalkboard and start teaching this skills to their kid, it happens around the dinner table, it happens as we get ready for the next school day, the night before, it happens around our bedtime routines, it happens on our car rides, it happens in the way we talk to our kids, in the way we set up our rule structures and routines.

Um, uh, let me give you one very specific example of a small thing that makes a very big difference, so you know, how often, as parents, when we're with our kids, we say, "It's time to go," why is it time to go? Because for about 20 minutes, we've been looking for a way to get out of this situation we're in, we've had enough, and, and at some point, we say, "It's time to go." Well for the kids, maybe it's not time to go, maybe they just started playing a game or maybe they're having a great conversation, why is it time to go? Because the adult decided it was time to go.

So when we tell our kids things like, "We're leaving in five minutes," that communicates many things to our kids, number one, it communicates, we respect you, that we respect your time, number two, it's that we expect that you have the ability to organize yourself to get ready to go in 5 minutes, because it's gonna be 5 minutes, not gonna be 25 minutes or 35 minutes or 40 minutes, it's gonna be 5 minutes and we're going. Um, and, and so we're asking our kids to build their planning skills, "Okay, I got five minutes left,

what do I wanna say? What do I wanna do? How do I wanna bring this game to a close? How do I wanna continue this conversation?" All of this cognitive activity is tremendously skill building for our kids, and it's all contain in the very small thing, "We're gonna leave in five minutes," as opposed to, "It's time to go right now," right? Um, let's take another great example, one of my favorites, breakfast time-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... right, parent asks the kid, "What do you want for breakfast?" Kid says, "Well, you know, I really like some pancakes with some fruit and maybe some chocolate chips in the pancakes," the parent says, "We don't have time for that," well, w- why are you saying that? So, so now we've got a situation where we've given the kid a, a, a question, and then... we, we, we knew the answer from the beginning. So giving our kids structured choices is an incredibly powerful thing to do, it's more powerful than just putting a breakfast like right on the table and saying, "Eat this or el... and that's it."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

So we say to the kids, "Well, d- do you want cereal, or do you want oatmeal?" Or, "We got three different choices of cereal, which kind of cereal do you wanna have?" Those things make your kids cognitively become better problem solvers, they gotta think, "Well, Hmm, which do I want? What is my preference? Why do I want this or that?" And then of course, whatever answer they give you, you can comply with, because you have, you have set the choices, right?

For all kinds of routines, giving our kids choices builds so many important social and emotional skills, and not only that, it models the asking of questions, and one of the things that our kids have to do for the future that we know they're gonna have to do for the future is not just answer questions in school and in other places, they're have to ask good questions, and so we can't be upset if our kids say to us, "Well, why do I have to have cereal?" Because then we have to have an explanation, "Well, you have to have cereal because we only have 12 minutes to get breakfast done so we can get out of the house, so I can be on time, so you can be on time, everybody can be on time, that's why we're having cereal." So if a kid... if the kid turns around and says, "Well, you know, if I have a slice of toast, it will take eight minutes-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... you know, that's shows good planning on their part, some analysis skills, some good conversational skills, and then if we sort of go along with that, we're again, giving our kids a great deal of respect and credit for understanding the situation in the household and working with us. So, so, you know, you, you could take any number of situations you like, and the way we interact with our kids does a tremendous amount with regard to their social and emotional development, and so in Emotionally Intelligent Parenting, we just sort of articulate that so that parents can sort of say, "Oh yeah, oh, in this situation, in that situation." They could see a lot of what they're doing in those situations, and maybe how, with a little tweaking, um, they can promote the skills of their kids even more.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So let's talk a little bit about, what we know about the importance of social and emotional development, so can you speak a little bit about what we know from the research around social and emotional development?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Right. So, so here's, here's how I would summarize the research, and there are hundreds of studies that talk about this, and, and the way I would summarize it is that social and emotional skills help make our valued outcomes happen. So, so, you know, we could talk about social and emotional skills, but it's, it's, I think, more relevant to talk about how do social and emotional skills help kids avoid depression, or if they are depressed, get out of it more quickly? How do they help our kids be less anxious? How do they help our kids be better academically? How do they help our kids be more understanding of, of, of human differences in different cultures? That's what these skills are for, and so when you look at the literature, you find out that, that both to prevent depression, to prevent substance abuse and to help kids, when they have those problems, get better, that building up their social and emotional competencies matters. And one of the most important ones that the literature talks about, is your feelings vocabulary.

So here's, here's a very interesting example linked to depression, if I'm having a negative internal feeling and I label that feeling as failure, or I label myself as bad, that's gonna lead me to act in ways that would be consistent with depression, but if I then look more closely at those feelings and I label my feelings as disappointed or frustrated, and I label myself as falling a little short, well, that creates a whole different dynamic for me as a kid, and I'm not gonna be depressed because I fell a little short, I am gonna be depressed if I feel I'm bad, and, and so what happens with our kids is that they don't have a good, accurate feelings vocabulary. It starts with their ability to look at other people and accurately label others' feelings. So it's paradoxical, but the way we help our kids be better at labeling their own feelings, is by helping them to be more accurate at labeling other people's feelings.

And, and so when I look at someone, if I think that they're either sad, mad or glad, which is what a lot of our kids think, then I'm not admitting the possibility of nuance, so we

talked to kids, and when we asked them how they're feeling and they say, "I'm mad," we would ask, "Well, how else are you feeling?" And then maybe we find out that they're feeling frustrated, maybe they're feeling annoyed, maybe they're feeling a little confused, but they put the mad label on that, now the problem is that when we label things as mad, we act mad, and when we act mad, we don't act reasonable, we're not listening to other people, our emotions are, are very, very powerful and often hijacked, but it was all unnecessary because we really weren't mad, we were disappointed and we were annoyed or frustrated.

So teaching our kids to accurately understand emotions in other people and in ourselves, is one of the most powerful things we can do to prevent the negative effects of power emotions like depression, anxiety and substance use. And, and so here again, you know, when kids get into treatment, what are we doing? We're helping them to learn to more accurately label their feelings so that they don't have to take such desperate action, right? I mean, a- again, why would a kid contemplate feeling suicide because they were a little miffed? You just wouldn't, but if you feel that you are in a, in an abyss of hopelessness, well then, yes, you know, you might go to those end, but, but that's very, (laughs) very rare that kids really feel that way.

So we have to understand that the research is telling us that when kids are younger and throughout their elementary, middle and high school years, focus on their emotional development, help them accurately label feelings in themselves and others, help them look at... from the time they're little and pick up all the nuances of feelings that the illustrators put into those books. Help them notice by pointing out to them, what's going on in the eyes, what's going on the hands, what's going on in the shoulders, what's going on in the face. As we get our kids looking at pictures more carefully and accurately and labeling them, we find they will then be better able to process emotions at the speed of life, which is what we all have to do.

And, you know, it's interesting because when our kids get older, they're gonna be in middle and high school, they're gonna read the great books, so called, and what makes these books great? What makes these books great is that they're about nuances of interpersonal relationships, but if our kids don't see nuances in interpersonal relationships and just see sad, mad, glad, good, bad, they're gonna find these books very tedious, they're gonna be... they're gonna say, "I hate this. I hate reading this," and this is gonna affect their English language arts score. It's gonna affect their standardized test scores for language arts. It's gonna have tremendous impact, all because our kids didn't have the ability to detect nuance in feelings. And, and there are so many ramifications of this that we could talk about for when they're, when they're in their college dorms, uh, dealing with their roommates, uh, dealing with prospective, uh, spouses and partners, um, emotion recognition, uh, eh, in self and others, i- is just so fundamental important, the research shows this very clearly.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think it's important to just... I think that was one of the most important things for me to I... to really learn and understand about, uh, social and emotional development, was that

growing the skills both prevents problems and negative outcomes and it promotes success, because we know that most of our Montana youth are, are making healthy choices, they're not experiencing depression, but we, we do have concerns in Montana around, you know, one, one in three students report consuming alcohol in the past month and about 37% had feelings of hopelessness, and so we have a lot... our parents are working hard and there's a lot of people in the community that are working hard to prevent negative outcomes-

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Right.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

... but, but with... when kids have stronger social and emotional skills, they're less likely to engage in risky behaviors and experience depression. I think it helps us as a state look at these small pieces of reading, reading picture books and naming emotions with kids, and the power that that has as they're growing, as they're growing through their years.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, you know, and there's one more thing that I think we, we, we should mention because I think that it's something that I'm gonna, I'm gonna guess, uh, Mo- Montanans, uh, are, are oriented toward, but maybe don't fully appreciate the power and potency of this kind of action, and that is helping others, that, that this is really where the roots of empathy come from, but more than empathy, we want our kids to develop compassion. Uh, you know, empathy is when we, we have a deep understanding of how other people are, but compassion is when we get off our chairs and help them, and the act of helping, the act of service, the act of being a contributor to your classroom, to your school, to your family, um, to your community, when kids do that, they feel a sense of purpose, and when they feel a sense of positive purpose, they are so much less likely to engage in substance use.

I would tell you that substance use is a, a, a strategy, in some cases adaptive, that kids go to when they feel no sense of positive purpose, when they don't know why I'm here, "I have no value, nobody values me," so, you know, if I have that feeling, that is the most potent negative feeling to have, and if engage in substance use, which is not a great idea, but while I'm engaging in that substance use, I don't have that feeling, and this is the nature of addictive behavior, 'cause when the drug wears off, I then go back to feeling that lack of value and purpose, how do I get rid of it? Well, I go back to the drug. And so this is why you see this addictive cycle in kids, and so paradoxically, giving kids opportunity to contribute and help is often the most critical point of helping them exit their difficult situations, because people wanna feel they matter, everybody does, a little kid wants to feel they matter.

If you go into a preschool... I work with a Head Start center... I'll just tell you a brief story about this, I work with a head start center, and they had... every kid had a j... had a, had

like, had like a job. Some kids would put out the of mats, some kids would put out the napkins for snack time, some kids would put out the cup, one kid would pour the juice. They even had a kid behind the kid that poured the juice with a paper towel to wipe up the spill from the juice pouring because you knew the kid was gonna spill the juice, so why make a big deal and say, "Oh my, you're, you're s..." you know-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... we expect... you're a kid, we expect you to spill some juice, we got people right behind you to wipe up. When parents would come into the school, the, the school had a display, they called it contributions, they didn't wanna call it jobs, they didn't wanna call it chores and the kids, these, these three and four year olds would take their parents by the hand, bring them to the contributions chart where their names were there along with some of their contributions-they were so proud. From the earliest age, kids have the instinct to be helpers, and in school, we gradually reduce that opportunity or we make it special extracurricular activity, for some kids, they can be helping. Every kid needs to be a helper.

Every kid needs to walk into the school, 180 school days, and know that somebody expects me to be helpful today. "Maybe I'm gonna tutor somebody, maybe I'm gonna sit with a lonely kid in the lunchroom, maybe I'm gonna help the teacher organize the classroom, maybe I'm gonna help clean up after the end of the school day. I'm gonna do something that's gonna be helpful, that I can look forward to, that gives me value and for which I will wanna be sure I've calmed myself down, I'm being empathic, I'm listening to other people, etc." So, so I'm, I'm so glad you brought that up because I think that that's something that we, we tend to neglect, um, but it's extraordinarily important, especially when kids are involved in mental health difficulties, to not feel that they have to be shunned aside and treated separately, no, we've gotta get them out there making contributions and let them know that as long as they don't relapse, they can keep making those contributions.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that the research confirms what a lot of parents already know intuitively as parents, is that these skills are what makes their kids successful. And it was, it was interesting we did, as part of our work with ParentingMontana.org, we did a small survey of Montana parents and just asked them... they had to have a child in elementary, middle or high school, and we asked them what, what are three skills that their child should have to be successful? And, you know, over 90% of what they said were social and emotional skills. So the research confirms, I think, what we already know, that, that growing the skills are what parents need, and, and parents were already on board with this.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

I think there are, there are a couple of different trends that are happening at the same time. There are a number of states that are adopting, uh, social and emotional learning standards, which is just a way of saying that... that they're saying that social-emotional learning needs to be part of what we do in schools, and, uh, and, and we need to do it systematically, thoughtfully, intentionally. Um, but we also have parents who are worried, and I understand where they're coming from with this, that time taken for social and emotional development is gonna take away from their kids' academics, and I understand that. And, and so the idea that when we... you know, that, that, that we just add time to increase the intellectual development of kids at the expense of their social and emotional development, we are, uh, we are risking an imbalance. You know, most parents don't know that the dropout rate in college is somewhere around 50%, and it's not that the kids drop out because they're not smart enough, because they're smart enough to get to the college door, but a lot of times they have been so focused on academics that they haven't had the chance to develop the social and emotional skills you need in college. It means that the kids are not developing the perspective-taking skills, the empathy skills to know how to navigate the social world of college. They can master the academic material, but that's not enough to be successful in college, you've gotta know a lot more, and it turns out to have a lot to do with your social, emotional development, your emotional intelligence. So, so I think, you know, as, as we see more and more, um, and as, as we look at data, for example, from business and industry, we find out that it is not your IQ that leads to your career advancement, it is much more strongly your EQ, your emotional intelligence, your social and emotional skills that lead to your advancement.

And I think if any, any parents are working parents, think about the colleagues that you like to work with the most, people that you wanna be on a team with, people that you wanna work on a project with, and it's not always gonna be the people with the highest IQ, it's gonna be the people who are organized, responsible, they follow through on things, they're sensitive to you and the other people they work with, in other words, it's their social and emotional competencies that you value. So, so the evidence is in the research and it's in the world all around us, um, we just have to look at it so that we can appreciate it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I agree. I, I wanna talk just a little bit about the how, so how do you do this? I think sometimes it can feel a little abstract, and you've given us a few examples of how to grow the skills. I think it's interesting, um, to know that as a parent, I have millions of conversations with my kids, but I don't need to sit down with a chalkboard, like you mentioned, and give a lesson on growing skills, and so the way I grow skills can happen in, in the everyday things that we're doing, the, the choices around breakfast, ways to engage them cognitively, and so I just wanted to know if you, um, would talk a little bit more about, um, how these can... how these skills can be taught in everyday conversations.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Sure. So there're, there're, there're a few different things, let me give you some examples, and obviously Emotionally Intelligent Parenting is filled with loads of them. Um, one thing to ask our kids in certain con... when we're having conversations with them that don't seem to going well, is to ask our kids, "How do you think I'm feeling right now?" As the parent asking the child, "How do you think I'm feeling right now?" And getting the kids to respond to that and then ask, "And how do you you know that? What's telling you that?" And you know, even young kids can respond to that question, you'd be surprised that, uh, you know, first graders even kindergartners can respond to that question, but certainly older kids can.

And, and that's a very powerful question because it sensitizes our kids to the importance of feelings and looking in the moment and really looking at you as a parent and looking at your feelings. And then, you know, you can ask your child, "And how are you feeling right now?" And then sometimes after we have that exchange of information, it's often wise to say, "Let's take a break for a few minutes and then come back and continue this conversation, now that we know how each other happens to be feeling right now?" And sometimes we pressure ourselves as parents to get resolution immediately, but very often, taking a step back is a really valuable, um, thing to do.

Another example of something that will come up a lot is when there's a difficulty in the family, something's not going right, the routine's not going right, dinner times are very unpleasant, um, bedtimes are very unpleasant, so it's to have a family meeting and to have a family problem-solving meeting where we ask, "So, so how does everybody feel about how this is going?" And we get everybody's ideas out on the table and, and then ask for everybody to have input on... in the question of, "So what would make this better? How we'd like this to go better and what are the ways in which it might?" And so what we're engaging in them is the, uh, social-emotional competency of responsible decision-making, where we as a family are working together to problem solve, uh, together, hearing each other's points of view.

Now the parents are still the parents, so at the end of the day, we're not having a vote necessarily, but we're getting input, and we're saying, "Okay, based on everything, here's how we're going to try this, and we're going to come back in a week and we're going to see how we think it's going. Do we need to make any changes? And if so, we'll make some changes," and, and this mechanism teaches kids, number one, that they have a voice in what happens in the family, number two, that any problem that comes up is a family issue, and we all have responsibility in dealing with it, um, number three, is that, uh, that, that we are o- open to looking at what happens and making changes, that we're flexible, and that's, that's really important as we look to the future.

Flexibility is one of the key attributes our kids need to have because the world as it is now is not going to be the world as it is as our kids are growing up, so it's really important. And, and, you know, I think, I think one interesting wrinkle is that anybody is allowed to call a family meeting, so by that I mean that if the kids are upset about something the parents do, they can call a family meeting, but if you are fed up with the

fact that their toys are never put away, or that they're close after... perhaps after they come out of the laundry and you put them on the bed, they would stay on the bed forever, the kids would sleep on them-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

(laughs)

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

... and never put them away, um, you can call a family meeting about that and, and have a conversation about that. So it's, it... these are, these are things that are pervasive, but also important. Um, dinner time routines are very important. Having your kids have some responsibility for helping is, is, uh, is, is important.

Uh, I worked with one parent who wanted her daughter, who's four years old, to set the table, for whatever reason, her daughter never got it right, and so the mom said, "Well, she just can't set the table, I'll do it, she can't do it, keeps getting it wrong." So I said, "So how does she do on putting out the spoon?" She said, "Yeah, she could put out the spoon, she gets that right." "So how about we make her the spoon expert and her job at dinner time is to make sure that everybody has a spoon in the right place, and after a couple of weeks of that, maybe we'll add in the fork, and then maybe we'll add in the plate, and maybe we'll add in a napkin, and maybe a glass or a cup, we'll add in the knife."

Um, and so again, thinking in terms of not what our kids can't do well, what can our kids do, and how do we build on that? I mean, these are just things that happen in the course of, of every day, and, uh, and, and, and that... these things when added up over time, make a very, very big difference.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love that it's the... it is the sum total of all of these conversations with your kid day after day, um, that are the influence. You, you mentioned one thing, uh, you said at the end of the day, parents are still parents, and so I want you to just speak to that a little bit, because I heard from parents just around getting their child's input and how that can be confusing with where their authority lies as a parent.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Yeah, well, you know, the, the, the literature is very clear that there are several kinds of parenting, uh, three primarily come to mind. One is called Laissez-faire parenting, which is parents that really don't have a lot of rules, don't have a lot of structure, give the kids a lot of, give the kids a lot of leeway, uh, then there's authoritarian parents, where the parent are the authority, they set the rules, they set the parameters, you know, all that, and then there are authoritative parents, and authoritative parents make the decisions but always explain them, and, and listen to the kids responses before they finalize things. And the evidence is very clear that it is authoritative parenting that is the most effective parenting, that produces kids with the least difficulty.

And, and the way I think about it is this, we want to put guardrails on the highway, we don't want to put up hard walls, and we don't want to have highways that have no bound... no side boundaries at all, but we want to put guardrails, because guardrails help our kids learn how to navigate the roads, the solid walls are difficult and threatening, and every time you run into one, it's, it's a disaster, having nothing on the road, it's likely your kids are not going to know the boundaries of the road, they're going to drive off, they're going to go flying off the side of the road, that's pretty dangerous.

We want to prepare our kids to, to be reasoning and reasonable, and, uh, and, and if we, uh, act in a... in an authoritarian way, especially our kids are in, uh, middle school and teen... early teenage years, you can expect a tremendous amount of opposition to that. And, um, you know, one of the things that I, I, I emphasize and I believe is, is that there's nothing more important than your relationship to your child as a parent... that, that nothing really should compromise that, because this is, this is for your life, this is, this is so critical, and, and so keeping the relationship first is, is of great importance, and, and that's, uh, that's... again, it doesn't mean we have no guardrails. We're not helping our kids if we say anything goes, but we're also not helping our kids if we're saying it's this way or else, 'cause, um, very little in life is like that.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So my final question for you is if you could tell our Montana parents one thing, if you could put a billboard up in every community right now, what, what would you say?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

I would say to remind your kids more often how much you love them and how proud you are of them, and what you're proud of them for, because one of the things that happens is that we feel a lot of love for our kids, we feel a lot of pride in our kids, but in our busy, hectic lives, we don't express it as often as we feel it, and kids only know what you show, they do not know really that we have this deep love and pride, I mean, they might, but typically they don't, so we got to show it. Always see the glass as a quarter full and not three quarters empty with your kids, focus on what they can do more than what they can't do, and if you do those things, you will certainly be anchoring your relationship with your kids in a positive way.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like that.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

If our Montana listeners wanted to go somewhere to learn more about what you're doing and your work, where would I send them?

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

Well, I work at the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, which is, uh, www.secdlab.org, and I also I'm the Co-director of the Academy for SEL in Schools, which offers certificate programs for teachers and counselors who want to become experts and certified in instruction in social and emotional skills, and also offers a certificate program for school leaders who want to turn their schools into schools of social-emotional competence and character. Those are two complimentary skill sets with two complimentary certificate programs, and if you go to selinschools.org, you can find out more about those certificate programs.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Thank you so much for spending the time today, I appreciate it. I appreciate the wisdom.

DR. MAURICE ELIAS:

It's my pleasure.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

A key takeaway from what I've heard today is that social and emotional skills are essential, they're associated with improved behavior, lower levels of emotional stress, positive wellbeing and doing better in school. In everyday conversations with our children, we can teach skills to help them understand and manage how to act, how they relate to others and how they make responsible choices. For more information on social and emotional development, you can find "social and emotional development" under the development tag in the I Want To Know More section of ParentingMontana.org, in addition to several articles written by experts in the field and a rack card of the same name in the media section. Thank you for joining us today, keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being continuously added to ParentingMontana.org.

45:57 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service and is brought to you by the Offices of Child Care, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service.

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45:57 END