Guiding Children With Tools for Success: Parenting With Social and Emotional Learning

"What was that noise?" I asked attempting to keep the worry out of my voice as my ten-year-old son, with a guilt-ridden face, entered the dining room. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and I had all heard the heavy clunk, thud, thud, clunk that seemed to make its way from the second story all the way down to the basement.

"We were throwing clothes down the laundry shoot, but then we threw a toy" explained my son.

I quickly replied, "See if you can find it in the basement."

When my son and his younger cousin sheepishly appeared with a wooden doll house bed in their hands, the headboard was in one hand, the rest in the other, clearly broken.

"Oh, that's no problem," said his kind Grandma. The younger cousin and my son were squirming as we looked at them, clearly uncomfortable.

"Thanks Grammy," I said. I know she would have been comfortable with simply throwing it in the trash, but this was an opportunity to teach responsible decision-making skills. It would be easier to simply move on and let it go. Grandpa had picked up the toy among many others for pennies at Goodwill, but my son had made a poor decision. And, he's likely to make many more in his young developing years. After all, mistakes are a critical part of learning. Every time I have the chance, I seize it. And this was one of those moments. I could guide him to fix what he had broken. And that fixing extended to relationships and feelings as well as an object.

My goal was to prompt his careful consideration rather than tell him what to do. So, E and I walked out of the room to a more private space, and I asked, "How do you think you can make up for this?"

He said he would apologize to Grammy. And he easily responded, "Papa can fix anything." So, we went together to ask if E's Grandpa might work with him to show him how to fix the toy bed. I suspect Grandpa actually enjoyed showing E how to properly and carefully sand down the wood, apply the glue, and clamp it together to help the glue solidify. These are the roots of responsibility. This is what it takes to parent in an intentional way that develops social and emotional skills within children – tools that will lead to their success in so many aspects of their lives.

In a national survey conducted by NBC Parent Toolkit and Princeton Research Associates, parents said they most want to promote their children's social and communication skills even above getting good grades or understanding technology.[1] Parents recognize that their children need to learn to collaborate if they are to make it through class projects or survive and thrive in the modern workplace. Parents realize that children have to learn to manage the feelings they experience whether its anxiety, anger, or frustration in order to accomplish their goals. And parents are also keenly aware that their children will only be successful in relationships with friends, family and teachers, and eventually coworkers and bosses, if they can think and feel with empathy for others and make compassionate choices with consequences in mind. All of these are critical social and emotional skills.

In fact, nationwide, schools are increasingly making learning social and emotional skills a top priority. They are using evidence-based curricula at each grade level, pre-K through college, to teach skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.[2] Though referred to, at times, as "soft skills," these can be the toughest - as in, helping kids build resilience, manage stress positively, and add to their inner strength - and also, the most critical, giving our children the very tools they need to be successful in their academics, extracurriculars, and in their future partnerships at work and at home.

Research shows that this focus will yield higher academic performance. A meta-analysis of 213 studies showed that students who had social and emotional learning as a part of their academic curriculum scored 11% higher on high stakes achievement tests than those who did not.[3] The jump in performance occurs because children are learning to focus their attention, to better problem solve, and to deal with the stress of the test in those high-pressure moments.

And we, as parents, know that this is just as much our job as it is our school's responsibility. We want to raise confident, responsible people. The good news is that by learning about what our children are working on at each age and stage can offer us empathy for their challenges. Through that newfound understanding, we can discover new teachable moments that support development each step of the way. Here are some examples at various ages and stages.

Ages 3-5

Work on Helping Your Child Develop a Feelings Vocabulary

"Name it to tame it" is a common expression, and it works! Talk about what body symptoms your child might experience, raising her *self-awareness*. "Does your face get red when you're angry? Do you feel hot? Does your heart beat fast?"

Practice naming the feelings when they occur. "Addy, it looks like you are frustrated because Sam took your toy. Is that right?" Always check in to see if your feelings label is accurate. This simple practice will help alleviate some of your preschooler's frustrations as she learns to better communicate her feelings. This will enhance her self-control when she is feeling overwhelmed.

Ages 6-7

Practice Coping Strategies

There are numerous firsts in a child's academic career at these ages including sitting at a desk with less play and less movement, reading for the first time, and being introduced to academic subjects like science, health, and social studies. Children feel all the pressures that go along with academic expectations for their performance. Help them cope with those stressors by thinking through options for calming down. Talk about and make a list. "What can we do when we're feeling anxious and tired?" You may start with a few suggestions like hugging a teddy bear, cuddling with a blanket, or hearing a story; but, allow your child to create ideas as well. Post the list or keep it handy. Use it after school to proactively practice coping strategies. After a high protein snack, ask "Which one do we want to practice today to help us feel better?" You can rest assured you are preparing your child with invaluable *self-management* skills that they'll take right back to school with them.

Ages 8-10

Collaborate on Household Responsibilities

This age group is undergoing a whole new level of *social awareness* as they better understand and become sensitive to fairness, can examine larger social issues, and enjoy collaborating in groups. Build on these emerging themes by talking about household responsibilities as a family and how you can team together to care for your home. List out the many possible ways of contributing and engage your child in identifying what she can do with competence. Be sure and model or work closely together on new tasks the first time so your child understands how to do it.

Then, allow your child to take responsibility for a task and complete it herself. Don't go behind and fix it if you feel it's not up to your standards. Allow her the satisfaction of completing a task. And, if there are a number of tasks, make a checklist so that your child can check them off when completed. Designating a family work time so that all feel like they are contributing to the care of your home working as a team will add motivation. Turn on some kid-friendly, high-energy music and get your jobs accomplished to the beat, taking pride in the care of your home.

Ages 9-11

Exercise *Relationship Skills* Through Problem-Solving Dialogue

This age group is increasingly influenced by their peer interactions and may come to you with friendship challenges. The tween years are a perfect time to use your best coaching skills to help increase your child's problem-solving ability and fine tune his *relationship skills*.

In coaching, you trust that your child can find a good solution to a problem with some careful consideration. Instead of responding to the complaint, "Susie keeps grabbing my game. Tell her to stop!" by intervening, you can prompt your child's thinking. You can begin by reflecting back your child's feelings. "Sounds like Susie's annoying you. Why do you think she's grabbing your toy? What you're doing isn't working, so what could you do to get Susie to stop?" Challenging your child's thinking and asking how they might change their approach can prompt creative thinking and deeper engagement. And when Charlie is successful with his own idea, he learns that he can competently manage his own relationships.

Ages 12-14

Practice *Responsible Decision-Making Skills* in the early teen years when they are just beginning to make connections between cause and effect. In fact, teens will undergo a major brain reconstruction moving their focus from learning through play toward more logical, rational thinking that will be required in their adult years.[4] And it is a process that requires time, practice, and mistakes. How can you reflect together on social situations where there was a negative outcome? "Tim cheated on his math exam and got caught. Now he has detention. Why do you think Tim made that choice? If he didn't study, what other options could he have taken instead? What could have happened as a result?" These kinds of conversations help teens make the connection between the action and the consequence, helping formulate their own sense of right and wrong. These simple conversations can lead a teen to become a more responsible thinker and, in turn, a more responsible decision maker.

Learning more about your child's social and emotional development as they rapidly grow and change adds to our confidence in our parenting. We can feel more competent that we are making decisions and guiding our children in an informed and responsible way. We can become our own best problem solvers as we meet their learning challenges with practical tools for their success today and for their future.

About The Author:

Jennifer Miller, M.Ed., author of the popular site, Confident Parents, Confident Kids, has twenty years of experience helping adults become more effective with the children they love through social and emotional learning. Among other roles, she serves as lead writer for ParentingMontana.org, a project that provides easy to use parenting tools to support a child's success from kindergarten through the teen years.

References

1. Princeton Survey Research Associates International. (2015). NBC State of Parenting Survey.
2. Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. (2016). SEL Framework, http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/outcomes/
3. Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011), The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82: 405–432.
4. Jensen, Frances E. (2015). *The Teenage Brain; A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults.* NY: HarperCollins.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2018). *Guiding Children With Tools for Success: Parenting with Social and Emotional Learning.* (Article). Retrieved from https://www.ParentingMontana.org.

This product was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.959 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of SAMHSA or Health and Human Services.