From Chaos to Calm
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Supporting Students in the Classroom with Social-Emotional Skills: Focusing on Self-Regulation

As educators, we have seen a change in students' ability to self-regulate and manage behavior in a school setting, especially after the COVID pandemic. We can see firsthand the challenges of addressing classroom and behavior management post pandemic, with heightened feelings of anxiety and uncertainty from the unprecedented disruptions.

In a survey done by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) during the 2021–22 school year 87% of U.S. public schools reported negative effects on students' socio-emotional development post-pandemic. Specifically, respondents identified increased incidents of classroom disruption from student misconduct (56%) with increases in acts of disrespect towards teachers and staff (48%). Additionally, 84% of schools observed declines in students' behavioral development and a reported increase in chronic student absenteeism (70-74% range). (Retrieved January 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp)

Research outlined in an article by Raghunathan (2022), indicates modest declines in children's attention, task persistence, and engagement, along with increased impulsivity during and after the pandemic. This article further asserts that "Child self-regulatory behavior may be a leading indicator of pandemic-related child disruptions. Self-regulation, the ability to monitor, evaluate, deploy and inhibit behavior or emotions to attain a behavioral goal[5,6] is closely related to emotion regulation, fear, and impulsivity.[7] Links between chronic stress and child self-regulation are well documented.[5-7] Poor self-regulation in childhood is linked to life course consequences for health and health behavior, educational attainment, and interaction with the criminal justice system." (Retrieved January 2025 from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8995397/).

But we do not need researchers to tell us that the diverse social emotional needs of our students are not being met by the current way of doing things. We cannot continue to do what we have always done, or we will get what we have always gotten, and it is no longer enough.

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In today's classrooms, fostering students' social-emotional learning (SEL) is as essential as academic achievement. Self-regulation—the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—is a cornerstone of SEL and critical for student success. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), self-regulation is a vital component of self-management, one of the five core competencies of SEL. By supporting students in developing self-regulation, teachers empower them to navigate challenges, stay focused, and engage meaningfully in learning. Here are strategies educators can use to foster self-regulation and resources to help them succeed.

Understanding CASEL's Core Competencies

CASEL identifies five interrelated SEL competencies:

Self-Awareness: Recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values.

Self-Management: Regulating emotions, managing stress, and achieving goals.

Social Awareness: Understanding others' perspectives and showing empathy.

Relationship Skills: Building healthy relationships and communication.

Responsible Decision-Making: Making ethical and constructive choices.

Self-regulation lies at the heart of self-management, enabling students to stay calm under pressure, persist through difficulties, and adjust their behavior to meet expectations. It also influences other competencies, such as maintaining positive relationships and making responsible decisions. (casel.org)

Watch this video The Missing Piece for an overview of why SEL is important and what it is.

Visit casel.org for great information and resources on SEL.

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Seven Great Strategies for Teaching Self-Regulation

1. ***Create a Calm and Predictable Environment***
   - Establish consistent routines and clear expectations.
   - Designate calm-down spaces where students can take a break to regain composure.
   - Use visual schedules to help students anticipate transitions.

2. ***Model, Teach, Practice, and Reinforce Emotion Regulation Skills***
   - Introduce emotion vocabulary and help students identify their feelings using tools like emotion charts, check-ins, visuals, and activities.
   - Practice mindfulness activities, such as deep breathing or guided imagery.
   - Model self-regulation by narrating your thought process when managing stress (e.g., "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take a deep breath before responding").
   - Use Declarative Language and Reinforce with 5:1 Ratio

3. ***Integrate SEL Activities into the Curriculum***
   - Use literature or scenarios to discuss characters' emotions and how they handle challenges.
   - Incorporate group activities such as cooperative learning, discussions, Socratic seminars, and project-based learning that build collaboration and problem-solving skills.
   - Design reflective journaling prompts to encourage self-awareness and goal setting.
   - Incorporate restorative practices like morning meeting or classroom discussions.

4. ***Teach Goal-Setting and Problem-Solving***
   - Help students break goals into smaller, manageable steps.
   - Teach problem-solving frameworks like STOP (Stop, Think, Options, Plan).
   - Encourage students to reflect on their progress and adjust their approach as needed.
   - Incorporate scaffolding for peer interactions, discussions, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

5. ***Incorporate Movement and Sensory Activities***
    - Provide brain breaks with physical activities to help students release energy.
    - Use sensory tools, such as fidget toys or stress balls, for students who need help focusing.
    - Introduce yoga or stretching exercises to promote relaxation.

6. ***Build Strong Relationships with Students***
    - Develop trust by showing empathy and understanding students' perspectives.
    - Use restorative practices, such as circles, to build community and resolve conflicts.
    - Regularly check in with students to offer support and encouragement.

7. ***Build Your Own Social Emotional Skills***
    - Build your skills and practice mindfulness across your day.
    - Reflect and write in a gratitude journal or other practices.
    - Read, watch videos, explore free webinars, or listen to podcasts on self-compassion, teacher well-being, co-regulation, and other SEL topics.

Supporting students' self-regulation skills is a long-term investment in their academic success and emotional well-being. By embedding SEL strategies into daily classroom routines, teachers can create an environment where students feel safe, supported, and empowered to manage their emotions and behaviors. When educators leverage resources like CASEL's framework and SEL programs, they equip students with tools to thrive both inside and outside the classroom.

Resources for Educators

Zones of Regulation: A curriculum designed to help students categorize and regulate their emotions. Learn more at https://zonesofregulation.com

GoNoodle: An online platform offering movement and mindfulness videos to help students manage their energy and emotions. Visit https://www.gonoodle.com.

Panorama Ed: An overview of the landscape of social-emotional learning programs. including what criteria to consider when evaluating curriculum providers and a list of 20+

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leading SEL programs and tools for K-12. https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/social-emotional-learning-curriculum

Common Sense SEL: resource center with free resources and activities to implement SEL in digital life in your school or classroom. https://www.commonsense.org/education/SEL

Books and Literature:

The Whole-Brain Child by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson.

Co-Regulation Handbook by Linda K. Murphy

Reference Cited

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