Activities to Support Social-Emotional Learning in the Library

by Liz Bowie

Research has shown that social-emotional learning is linked to improved academic performance. And with all the new procedures, rules, and stressors the fall 2020 school year will bring for educators and students alike, it's more important than ever to incorporate social-emotional learning in back-to-school plans.

School librarians are in a unique position to lead the charge, as some of the key facets of social-emotional learning — communication and social skills, inclusivity and community, growth mindset and problem-solving, character and kindness, and reflection — are all areas in which librarians can offer support school-wide.

Keep reading for activities you can use to support social-emotional learning in the library.

Communication and Social Skills

Whether you're hosting in-person classes, virtual classes, or a mix of the two, communication is going to be more important than ever. Most students have spent months this year under safer-at-home orders and likely have not had many opportunities to socialize with others. Use these activities to promote interaction:

- Look for ways to empower students during the school day, as it will take some time to adapt to shifting guidelines and rules. Tap into their creativity by having them design posters or create public service announcement videos promoting some of the new safety procedures that your school has implemented.
- Get kids learning about each other with Conversation Cubes and communicating about their feelings with Emoji Cubes. Not doing in-person instruction? No problem. Choose a student to pick a number between one and six and roll the die that many times on your video call to land on your conversation starter. Students can take turns relaying their experiences. Or, make a short video of your cube rolling on your desk and upload it to Flipgrid. Have students respond to the prompt through their own short videos. If kids are too shy to share on camera, roll the die at the end of class and assign the prompt as a writing assignment for the next class period.
- Let's Talk Cubes offer similar opportunities to spark discussion and feature prompts that ask students to problem-solve social situations.

Inclusivity and Community

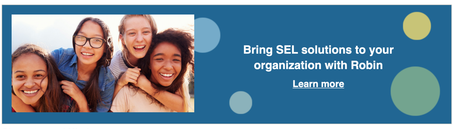
Now more than ever, kids need to feel seen, heard, and recognized. As the heart of your school, your library is the perfect place to foster that connection.

- Your physical and e-book collections will be key resources in promoting diversity and inclusivity. Create displays and reading lists that highlight a wide range of perspectives, share literature that communicates the experiences of diverse populations, and lead discussions around those experiences. Ask students to respond to writing prompts and reflect on the books you've shared with them.
- In a time of social distancing, it's difficult to foster connection and community. Collaborative art projects like Stickto**g**ether posters can help you accomplish this without compromising distancing guidelines. If students are attending school in person, cut apart the stickers and give each student their own set to work with, allowing them to work on the poster one at a time. If students are attending virtually, use the poster as an incentive. Hang it in a spot that can be seen by students during video lessons, and place stickers for each correct answer, finished work, and so on to motivate students. Download more ideas for using Stickto**g**ether this fall here.
- Giant tabletop coloring sheets provide another opportunity for students to contribute to a collaborative art project. Have students take turns relaxing and coloring a portion of the poster to create a colorful work of art you can hang in the library.
- Help kids show their individuality and get to know each other with Color Craze Me Posters and Sticker Sets. Kids can each color their posters and then customize them by personalizing the stickers with facts about themselves.

Creativity, Growth Mindset, and Problem-Solving

Over the past several years, many librarians have added makerspaces to their library programs to cultivate critical thinking, perseverance, problem-solving, and creativity. The social distancing requirements brought on by the pandemic have left librarians wondering how they can safely offer making opportunities. Although it may take some additional planning, there are many things you can do.

- There are lots of ways to keep kids making at home with common materials. Check out these "6 Maker Activities to Keep Kids Learning at Home," which include engineering challenges and ideas like painting with coffee.
- Supply kids with Cool Critters Mini Activity Cards and craft supplies to work on at home or in their individual workspaces. They'll have fun making giraffe puppets out of paper bags and butterflies out of toilet paper tubes.
- Coloring has been shown to have a calming effect on students. Give them some relaxation time when they can let their creativity shine with themed coloring sheets, bookmarks, and posters.
- Roylco Basket Bases offer kids the opportunity to use yarn, paper strips, or raffia to create one-of-a-kind baskets. With presorted supplies, students can safely work on their individual baskets. Talk about the best way to create patterns, how to figure out how much yarn they'll need, and so on.
- Origami requires kids to follow spatial directions and problem-solve — and results in a work of 3D art. Provide origami and kirigami paper for kids to try their hand at creating origami food and bowls. Kids can also create flower gardens with origami or kirigami designs. Animals Origami Bookmarks provide the paper and instructions all in one and walk students through each step.
- You can also continue to offer activities like robotics and engineering challenges, and even have students collaborate on this work by adapting the activities. Create individual bagged kits with building supplies like building bricks, KEVA planks, Strawbees, or other building tools. With students working at their individual desks, have each student write and/or draw directions for building something and then have them build according to their partner's directions. Discuss why the build did or didn't work. What had to be changed or adapted? Quarantine materials before they are used by the next set of students.
- Place students in partners for robotics challenges as well, and put one student in charge of the robot and one in charge of the device to code it. For example, have the first student build a short obstacle course for their Sphero robot and ask their partner to code the robot to move through it. If the robot didn't make it through the first time, have them discuss what they could do differently.
- Read Nick Provenzano's "Makerspace Activities for In-Person, Hybrid, and Virtual Instruction" for more making ideas.



Character and Kindness

We can probably all agree that the world could use a little more kindness right now, and when you find ways to tap into it, children have an amazing capacity for caring for others.

- Have students safely create maker projects for others by providing individual supplies for each student. Get ideas from Gina Seymour's "How to Inspire Students to Be Compassionate Makers."
- Promote acts of kindness through activities and literature. Read books such as the ones on these lists from We Are Teachers, A Mighty Girl, and Brightly.
- Incorporate writing skills and positive acts of kindness with Kindness Cards or Affirmation Cards, which feature inspirational quotes and messages to brighten someone's day. Have students write an encouraging message or a thank-you note and leave it in a friend's or neighbor's mailbox.
- Talk about what it means to have good character and to recognize good character traits in others. Then, create a warm fuzzies Padlet with each student's name in a column. Ask each student to write one nice thing about each of the other students under their headings. In the end, each student should have a "warm fuzzy" from every other student (they can remain anonymous).

Reflection

Reflection is an important part of personal growth, coping with personal feelings, and empathizing with others.

- Reflection journals or Color Craze Journals offer students a platform to reflect on the past year and cope with their anxiety. Talk about the negatives and the positives that have come out of the pandemic. Explore the idea that many of us feel we are living through an unprecedented time, but the learnings we gain from this time will help future generations. By writing down the feelings and ideas that they are experiencing right now, students are creating primary sources that will be invaluable to those future generations.
  - Writing prompts can include the following:
    - What's different in your life now from before the pandemic?
    - How does it feel to not be able to spend time with your friends in person?
    - How is school different now? Do you like it more or less? Why?
    - What will you remember most about this time of quarantine?
    - What will you tell your kids or future generations about the COVID-19 pandemic?
    - What is something positive that came out of the pandemic?
    - How could you help a friend deal with feeling alone?
    - How do you think your friends felt over the summer?
    - What are you most worried about right now?
    - What are three things you'd like to ask a teacher or a parent?
    - What new skill have you learned or what are you proud of that you've done recently?
- Reflecting on diverse literature also helps students understand different viewpoints.
  - Writing prompts can include the following:
    - Do you think this story could have happened to you? Why or why not?
    - What type of environment do the people in the story live in?
    - How do we treat people who are different from us?
    - Has anyone ever tried to change you?
    - Have you ever tried to change someone else?
    - Why do people have different skin tones?
    - How do you react when you meet people who are different from you?
    - How has someone's disability helped them or others?
    - Do you think our school is diverse? Why or why not?
    - Why is it important to study other cultures?
- Pair character-focused read alouds with discussion prompts, such as the sayings on Character Bookmarks and Kindness Bookmarks.
  - Discuss what happened in each story and what motivated the characters to act the way they did.
    - What lessons did the characters learn?
    - Was there a clear right or wrong way to act?
    - What happened as a result of the characters' actions?
    - How would students have acted differently if they were part of the story?
- Create a calming corner in your library with soft, easily cleanable bean bags, lamp lighting, and even a large sheet for a tented overhang to block fluorescent lighting. Make it a place of respite when students seem overwhelmed with new rules and requirements.

Additional Resources

Discover these additional resources for weaving social-emotional learning into your library program, and help make the transition into the fall 2020 school year a little easier for the students you serve.

- "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus"
- Cosmic Kids Yoga Videos
- Resources to support SEL in the library
- Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit

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Author

Liz Bowie

Liz is the former Marketing Content Manager for Demco. In her role she helped develop classroom games, learning centers, and professional development resources that garnered 46 industry awards for excellence in education.

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