

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR JEWISH EDUCATORS

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❖ What is Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)?

- Social and Emotional Learning is an approach to education that is designed to strengthen a person's ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, adapting to the complex demands of growth and development, and forging an adult identity.
- A comprehensive approach to addressing SEL is one which stresses the following areas (Elias et al., 1997):
 - Life skills and social competencies: the general skills needed to negotiate the complex interactions in school, the workplace, and life (e.g., self-control, listening, communication, problem-solving)
 - Health-promotion and problem-prevention skills: context-specific and developmentally linked application of life skills, needed to confront specific situations which put an individual at risk of psychosocial difficulties (e.g., how to use assertive communication to refuse drugs when offered).
 - Coping skills and social support for transitions and crises: the ability to access resources, both internal and external supports, during times of stress.
 - Positive, contributory service: a chance to build meaningful relationships and to contribute to efforts different from, “larger than,” oneself, along this the reflective processes which engender a sense of usefulness and purpose.
- SEL practitioners have applied Community Psychology principles to SEL program development, implementation, institutionalization and evaluation.



❖ Why is SEL relevant to Jewish educators?

- Youth growing up in America today are bombarded with images of violence. Information technologies present images of alternative lifestyles, even diverse forms of Jewish observance.



The amount of exposure to information unfiltered by adult caregivers is unprecedented in human history. These same technological advances increase this exposure, while at the same time reduce contexts for forging meaningful interpersonal relationships. Paradoxically, our well-connected students are at risk for isolation, alienation, and poor social relationships. Jewish education exists as an overlay to secular education, and serves to exacerbate the pressures of time that our children and their families face. Our efforts to create peaceful classrooms and communities must be as systematic, potent, and widespread as the competing influences. Jewish youth are not shielded from these societal forces – they come to school with the same emotional and social issues.

- Moreover, Jewish educators see as a major goal of Jewish education the fostering of “menschlichkeit” in their students. As we envision the type of student we would like to “emerge” from our Jewish educational efforts, we picture young adults who are caring, committed, passionate, knowledgeable both in a Jewish and secular context, respectful of themselves and others, and able to solve problems in a peaceful, constructive manner. This major Jewish value – that of being a “mensch” – has been one of the few constants among the shifting landscape of American Jewry.



- Jewish educators are finding that learning to be a “mensch”, like anything else, takes structured practice, and those that have worked with SEL have found many of the goals to overlap. In a way, SEL is a “menschlichkeit”-promotion approach! While Jewish educators have long agreed on the goal of promoting Jewish values, we are learning that the “how to” is more difficult. SEL adds to the discussion a wealth of research and experience in the field of curriculum-development and school-based programming.
- Jewish communal professionals, including educators as well as youth and community workers, have been interested in coordinating their efforts to create a seamless, positive climate for Jewish youth. The work done in SEL program implementation, institutionalization, and evaluation can be a valuable resource in this effort.

❖ **What work has been done in bringing SEL to Jewish educators?**

- Jewish educational settings, Day Schools and Temple-based religious schools from the three major denominations, have worked with SEL approaches. Teachers in these schools have been creative in developing materials which bring the skills of emotional intelligence (“EQ”) and social and emotional learning into Jewish content areas. Traditional Jewish texts are full of stories involving decisions and problems that can become an instructional focus. A worksheet developed by Dr. Bruce Ettinger of the Children’s Institute in Livingston, NJ, and based on SEL materials, is attached. His work is based on one well-researched SEL approach, Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (Not available on Web site).



- The Tel Aviv school district has developed the “Binat HaLev” (Wisdom of the Heart”) approach, building on SEL principles. This serves as an overlay to a Life Skills curriculum approach that the Ministry of Education has installed in all Israeli schools, especially at the elementary level and now moving more strongly into Middle and High Schools. Educators there have made monumental strides in developing emotionally intelligent schools. Educators in Tel Aviv have come to understand the centrality of these skills and have, in consultation with Dr. Elias, developed a comprehensive approach to SEL.
- Finally, the Jewish Identity Development Project is an ongoing action-research project involving bringing together the issues discussed above. This is an ongoing “laboratory” for exploring Jewish identity issues, curriculum materials, school-based interventions, and approaches to teaching and parenting in ways that build “menschlichkeit.”

Reference

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M. E., & Shriver, T. P. (1997). Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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Other Resources:

Social Problem Solving:
www.umdnj.edu/spsweb

Jewish Identity Development Project:
www.rci.rutgers.edu/~jkress

The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning
www.casel.org

Emotionally Intelligent Parenting:
www.eqparenting.com