

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

## How to Embed SEL Into Your Instruction

Careful explanation of the ‘why’ behind social and emotional learning can prime students to build their communication and collaboration skills.

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Embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) into instruction is a powerful way to help students connect and engage in learning. According to CASEL, one of the leaders in schoolwide SEL, [explicit SEL instruction](#) requires “consistent opportunities for students to cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.”

Critical to that approach is sharing with our students the why behind SEL content, just as we do with academic content. Explaining why we check in, why we ask students to pair up, or why we work through different problem-solving strategies is core to [meaningful and successful SEL](#).

I’ve found that when I’m intentional about the language I use when I’m infusing a lesson and my practice with SEL content, students respond with more buy-in and motivation to learn. Furthermore, SEL becomes a seamless part of the classroom’s culture, rather than one more thing to do, so the connection between academic practices and social and emotional learning deepens.

Done right, embedding SEL into our instruction builds a more supportive and equitable classroom environment. Both teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions improve as the focus is on developing relationships through awareness, communication, and reflection.

### SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR SEL CORE COMPETENCIES

Explicitly sharing why you ask students to do certain SEL activities can be even more powerful when you place it within the context of [SEL core competencies](#). To do this, teachers can intentionally plan how a specific SEL skill or core competency relates to an instructional strategy and then verbalize this directly with students.

Here’s how sharing the why might sound with several core competencies:

**Self-awareness:** Starting a lesson with a check-in is a great way to help students practice self-awareness (an [understanding of one’s inner life](#)) and how that affects behavior and decision-making; doing so also gives teachers a sense of students’ emotional entry point to learning. To be explicit and help students understand how a check-in activity builds their SEL skills, try saying, “We’re doing this check-in as a way for you and me to be aware of your energy level before beginning today’s lesson.”

I recommend Checking In starter screens from [Desmos](#) and [SEL templates from Pear Deck](#) for models that teachers can adapt to work in a virtual or in-person environment and allow students to engage through the technology.

**Self-management:** Guiding students toward setting goals and defining actionable steps to achieve those goals is one way to cultivate a student’s sense of [self-management](#)—the ways in which they manage their own learning. As students plan for and take initiative toward that goal (such as keeping track of when assignments are due and managing their time), they demonstrate key aspects of self-management.

To be explicit, try saying, “When you set a goal based on today’s target, we will be working on self-management to achieve it.”

**Responsible decision-making:** Students tend to respect the rules and expectations for classroom learning, whether virtual or in person, when they understand how rules and expectations are connected to responsible decision-making.

One of the best ways to forge that connection is to explicitly ask them to co-construct those rules and expectations; when they work on collective, responsible decision-making to arrive at a consensus, it reinforces their consciousness of their personal decision-making process.

Try reminding students of their role in creating rules for the class, and be explicit about how that connects to their social and emotional learning. “When we discuss expectations for virtual learning, we’re going to use responsible decision-making and think how others might react if you don’t follow the rules.”

**Relationship skills:** When students are purposefully grouped for instructional strategies such as during [write-pair-share](#) or [jigsaw](#), they work on their relationship skills. Teachers can support students as they develop these skills with group work that includes ice breakers and [community building activities](#), as well as student conversation [prompts](#) (e.g., “What makes a good team?”).

Same thing with pairing students: To verbalize the reasoning behind having students interact and to encourage students to work together, try saying, “I’m pairing you up so we can develop your communication, collaboration, and relationship skills.”

**Social awareness:** Students can practice social awareness, which relates to students’ ability to empathize, when teachers highlight various ways to approach a problem and show the [value of multiple perspectives](#).

Next time you give a problem that can be solved in different ways (e.g., solving a math problem by [talking through](#) various approaches), begin a class discussion by saying, “Someone might not have seen it the same way you did. When we talk about different strategies and perspectives, we’re working on social awareness.”

### REPHRASING QUESTIONS TO FOSTER A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

As with instructional strategies, the language we use when asking questions can be framed with an SEL focus to foster an environment that is supportive and equitable. Here are some ideas for rephrasing that can make students feel invited to participate rather than put on the spot.

“Do you have any questions?” → “Who has the first question?” or “Ask me two questions about…”

“What did you get?” → “How did you start? Talk through your thinking.”

“What didn’t you get?” → “What do you know?” and “What do you wish you knew?”

“What are you working on?” → “What are you learning?”

“Where were you?” → “We missed you. Is everything OK?”

“What do you want to talk about?” → “What’s on your mind?”

“How are you?” → “What are your top three feelings today?”

“What do you have to do today?” → “What do you get to do today?”

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