



21st Century Community Learning Centers

Lessons From the Field: Serving All Students, Including Students With Disabilities



Topic Guide 10

Supporting Social-Emotional Learning

After reading this guide, you'll be able to...

- ✓ Provide opportunities for social-emotional learning.
- ✓ Recognize student behaviors as forms of communication.
- ✓ Facilitate positive peer interactions.
- ✓ Co-create expectations and agreements with students.

Tools in this guide include...

- ✓ An action planning checklist, with links to selected resources.

Social-Emotional Learning: Why It Matters

Social-emotional learning is an important part of 21st CCLC programs for two reasons: First, because these programs often have fewer structural constraints than school settings, they can provide much-needed opportunities for students to learn and practice social skills. The ability to navigate social spaces helps students in every area of life, including home and school. High-quality program environments support social-emotional learning by facilitating positive relationships between students and adults, encouraging positive interactions among peers, maintaining appropriate group management, and enabling youth to have voice and choice.¹

DEFINITION

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning is the process through which people of all ages gain life skills that support their social and emotional development. These skills include managing emotions, resolving conflicts, making responsible decisions, setting goals, feeling and showing empathy, and building and maintaining positive relationships.



YOU FOR YOUTH

All *Lessons From the Field* guides on inclusion, as well as other professional learning and technical assistance tools for 21st CCLCs, are available on the U.S. Department of Education's You for Youth (Y4Y) website at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

Second, social-emotional learning can help children manage their own behavior in the 21st CCLC environment and express their needs in a positive, prosocial way. Strong social-emotional skills lead to improved self-regulation and the ability to cope with difficult situations, and they also support increased attention; all of these lead to better learning outcomes.²

Providing Opportunities for Social-Emotional Learning

All children need opportunities to learn and practice appropriate social skills. Such opportunities can be especially important for students who have trouble picking up on social cues, interacting with others or responding appropriately in various social situations. Facilitated role-play is one of several strategies for providing practice and guidance. Skits naturally set up scenarios that provide context for explicit instruction and coaching from adults (e.g., “What other words could you use to get your point across without criticizing anyone?”) as well as opportunities for modeling and peer support.

Effectively using such strategies to foster social-emotional learning requires that 21st CCLC program staff understand why such learning matters and what they can do to facilitate it. At the Gardner Pilot Academy program in Massachusetts, teaching social awareness is part of the mission statement. Images

and reminders of the mission are posted throughout the program space. Programs that focus on social-emotional development sometimes include a counselor as a staff member. For example, the St. Elizabeth School afterschool program in Oakland, California, has a counselor with a background in human development, mental health consulting and violence prevention. The counselor has worked with many families in the community and therefore understands student needs and backgrounds. Disability rights advocate Stephen Hinkle points out that children with disabilities such as autism can benefit from targeted support as they learn to navigate social spaces.

Understanding Behavior as Communication

There are times when a student seems to use inappropriate behavior for no reason, or simply to challenge a staff member. When this happens, remember: *All behavior is communication, and all behavior has purpose.*

It’s not always easy to identify the reason for a particular behavior. If a student is withdrawing from a program activity, for example, it might seem like the student is simply being uncooperative. A closer look, however, might reveal that the student doesn’t know how to do the activity or what role to take. Perhaps the student

Story From the Field

The Hidden Curriculum: Social Understanding, Social Skills and Belonging

Stephen Hinkle, M.Ed., National Speaker and Disability Rights Advocate

Each environment has a different set of social rules, but children might need help understanding that the rules for communication and behavior can vary, depending on context. What’s acceptable behavior in a sports stadium differs from what’s expected in a classroom. Art galleries, auditoriums, cafeterias, playgrounds — each of these environments has its own set of norms. Also, children need to know how to interact with an audience, how to be a good guest when somebody invites them over, and how to recognize and react to humor. A person with a disability such as autism might struggle with humor because they tend to think literally. So you have to model the slang, and the humor, and the banter, and acceptable mischief, and some of the other things.



lacks the social skills needed to navigate the afterschool program, or misunderstands the rules or expectations. Or the problem might stem from frustrations carried over from the school day. When staff seek to understand why and what a student might be communicating through challenging behaviors, it can help staff respond with understanding and compassion — and make the most of opportunities for social-emotional learning.

A helpful starting point might be a written policy on behavior support that is understood and shared by all staff. This example of language for a behavior support policy comes from Thomas Gardner Pilot Academy in Massachusetts: “Each individual is unique, and each situation is unique, which may require an adjustment of our techniques to meet the needs expressed at that particular time.” This statement makes it clear that the program takes an individualized approach to behavior support and is willing to make modifications in policies, practices and procedures to support students where they are.

Any of a child’s past or current experiences may influence their communication of challenges in the moment. Typically, children and youth use challenging behavior to communicate an unmet need (e.g., hunger, fatigue, feeling unsafe), lack of a skill needed to handle a task or interaction (e.g., following step-by-step instructions, communicating with peers, making a

choice from multiple options), and/or a mismatch with the environment (e.g., overstimulating, overly rigid structure, not enough structure).

Cultural factors might also impact how a student engages with the program. At Historic Scott School in Utah, where a large number of students come from refugee populations, one student refused to go to the basement to work on an art project. Eventually, by communicating with members of the refugee community, staff learned that this behavior resulted from experiences she had lived in her war-torn home country. Knowing this, staff were able to shift their perspective from viewing the student’s behavior as defiant to viewing it as an expression of anxiety about the situation.

Identifying what a student is communicating through behavior helps staff select strategies or modifications that respect the student’s needs. Often it is possible to redirect behavior through modifications. For example, if a student has difficulty sitting still during homework time, consider tying an exercise band around the front legs of the chair so she can tuck her feet behind it and pull against it. Learning to understand student behavior as communication, and to use that knowledge to redirect behavior and to support social emotional learning, can require staff training, changes in policy and plenty of patience on everyone’s part.

Giving Choice When a Student “Shuts Down”

Katie Hendriks and Staff, Girls Inc. of Alameda County, California

With our third-grade students, we use an “opening circle” to start each program day. The circle gives students regular opportunities to express what is on their minds, but participation is a choice rather than a requirement. We have one student who shuts down when she gets upset. At the beginning of the year, she wouldn’t say anything in the circle. We decided to emphasize that she has a choice, that she can either answer or pass. This approach helped her remain part of the group without feeling forced to participate in an activity that was uncomfortable for her. Providing choice is a way to acknowledge that everyone develops differently. We emphasize to students that when they try their hardest and do their best, they’re doing fine.

Facilitating Positive Peer Interactions

In every program, social interactions happen every moment. Program staff can look for opportunities to demonstrate or model social skills. They can also *facilitate* positive peer interactions by deliberately creating opportunities for students to work and play together. In Lowell, Massachusetts, one of the afterschool teachers facilitated multiple peer interactions by addressing students with statements such as these: “Do you want to sit together? I see you are drawing the same things.” “Can you help him write the word ‘vampire?’” “Do you want to make an airplane? Stay with him to help him make an airplane.” These kinds of facilitated interactions create opportunities to see how children handle social situations and to tailor strategies that support building positive relationships.

Often, the best way to facilitate positive peer interactions in an inclusive setting is to use strategies that can yield positive results for all children, with peers acting as natural supports for students with disabilities. Staff at the Eagle View Elementary program in Utah provide consistent positive communication and encouragement to students during the school day, and this carries over to the kindergarten afterschool program. There, centers facilitate play and opportunities for students to use similar positive language when talking with one another.

When children with disabilities participate in social activities and form positive social relationships, such milestones are indicators of success for inclusive programs.³ These successes don’t mean, however, that it’s time to let up on supporting positive peer interactions.

Think About It How Might the Arts Create Opportunities for Positive Student Interactions?

Activities that are often done individually can be a source of unity and group pride when students combine their efforts.

Visual Arts: Students create a mural by piecing together individual photographs or artwork. Or they jointly plan and execute an art project.

Music: One student writes the words for a “jingle” to promote a healthy behavior, another student creates a tune for it, and a third student performs it for the first two. Once the group decides it’s ready for prime time, all or part of the group performs it for the rest of the students.

Dance: See Edutopia’s blog entry and video on mixed-ability dance for ideas and inspiration: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/mixed-ability-dance-special-needs-karen-peterson>.

In fact, because social communication becomes more complex as students get older, many students will continue to need help expressing themselves and understanding subtle cues and norms. Facilitated interactions provide opportunities for children to learn about nonverbal cues such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions and personal space.

Co-Creating Expectations and Agreements

Positive, nonpunitive approaches to behavioral challenges need to be based on an informal plan that involves the student. Each staff member needs to be aware of the strategies included in the plan and how to implement them. During staff training sessions, staff might use role-play to practice strategies such as using positive language and a positive tone of voice. Together, they could think of possible responses to challenging behavior



Story From the Field

Community Agreements

Katie Hendriks and Staff, Girls Inc. of Alameda County, California

Third-Grade Teacher: I try different things to see what works. I give students options, like letting them stand instead of sit if they need to. They don't have to conform like they do during the school day, but we do use the same behavior monitoring system that they use in school. We also have agreements: respect everyone and everything, one mic (one person talking at a time), raise a quiet hand, don't yuck my yum (don't say something mean about something I like just because you don't like it), ask before you do, try your hardest and try your best.

First-Grade Teacher: If a student leaves the group to be alone, I go talk to the student. I say, "You're not in trouble, but you're welcome to come back and join us." Usually, they do. Sometimes they just need a little time alone. Some students are always wiggling, so we let them use a tall table so they can stand while they work. We use "agreement" instead of "rules." An agreement is something we agree on together. For example, we asked them what they wanted, and one of the things was no hitting, so that became part of our "respect" agreement.

Second-Grade Teacher: I have a student who likes to stand up, so I let her do that. Also, one of our community agreements is the "I-Message." You name the action (e.g., "when you leave me out of a game"), use an I-Message to name the emotion (e.g., "I feel sad because I want to be part of the team"), think about how others feel, then move on and worry about yourself. The girls know when they're doing something wrong. You'll hear them say, "You're not following the community agreement!"

(e.g., “I know you feel frustrated. You may not hit. Why don’t we take a walk together so you can get a break from the situation?”).

With support and encouragement, students can establish personal goals for self-management and leadership. As they take responsibility for their behaviors and manage their interactions with others, they are building self-regulation skills. Everyone needs these skills to get along with others in formal and informal settings. Self-regulation also facilitates student engagement and helps to reduce behavioral challenges. Young children, in particular, need positive but substantive feedback as they learn to self-regulate. Feedback should be process-oriented or action specific — “I liked the way you worked with Sean to figure out how to share the blocks” instead of the generic “Good job.”

As students learn to manage their own behaviors, they can also participate in group governance. At the 21st CCLC Girls Inc. site in San Leandro, California, students and staff have collectively developed “community agreements” instead of “rules” to encourage girls to take ownership and feel invested in the program environment.

Notes

¹J. Baldwin Grossman, J. Goldsmith, J. Sheldon, and A. Arbretton, “Assessing After-school Settings,” *New Directions for Youth Development*, 121 (2009): 89-108; J. E. Downing and K. D. Peckham-Hardin, “Inclusive Education: What Makes It a Good Education for Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities?” *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 32, no. 1 (2007): 6-30; and R. Tobin, “Interactions and Practices to Enhance the Inclusion Experience,” *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 3, no. 5 (2007).

²B. Sylvester, *A Biological Brain in a Cultural Classroom: Enhancing Cognitive and Social Development Through Collaborative Classroom Management* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003); and X. Wei and C. Marder, “Self-concept Development of Students With Disabilities: Disability Category, Gender, and Racial Differences From Early Elementary to High School,” *Remedial and Special Education*, 33, no. 4 (2012): 247-57.

³S. Odom, V. Buysee, and E. Soukakou, “Inclusion for Young Children With Disabilities: A Quarter Century of Research Perspectives,” *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33, no. 4 (2011): 344-56.



Supporting Social-Emotional Learning

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (With Selected Resources)

Support Social-Emotional Learning

- **Develop activities that enable students to identify their own body signals and strengthen self-regulation.** Teach students to be aware of what their body feels like when they are starting to get upset. Then teach different ways to let off steam (e.g., breathing exercises, movement, asking for help).
 - A visual **mood thermometer**, where red means mad and blue means cool and calm, can use color to help a student express emotions.
 - Create an **emotions matching game** in which students choose a card with a facial expression and tell about a time they felt that way. Consider using photographs of the students in the program, or use the facial expressions chart at <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/2006/feelingchart.pdf>.
 - Ask the students what helps them feel better when they are mad. Create a **poster with a list or visuals** that remind students what they can or cannot do when they are mad. For example, students can take a walk around the gym, but cannot touch a peer.
- **Celebrate and encourage student achievements**, even the small ones, to build confidence in their skills. For example, “I am proud of how you handled not winning that card game. I could tell by your face you were frustrated, but you made a good choice and walked away.”
- **Learn more about social-emotional learning:** The Susan Crown Exchange and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality have developed a guide to promising practices for social-emotional learning in adolescents. It includes suggestions for practices and narratives from staff and students: https://www.selpractices.org/about?goal=0_141b44ffc6-1088bc39b8-55719317.

Understand Behavior as Communication

- **View behavior as communication.** Try to understand what need the student might be trying to meet by using a challenging behavior. Is it a basic need (e.g., hunger, fatigue, safety)? Does the student lack the skill to accomplish the task or comply with the instruction (e.g., the student remembers the first two steps but not the last two steps of the directions)? Is there a lack of fit between the student and the environment (e.g., not enough structure, or too much)?
- **Conduct informal check-ins.** Notice body language, facial expression, and changes in peer interactions and participation. Know the signals that mean a student needs support, and be aware of triggers that might cause challenging behaviors or other difficulties.
- **Facilitate activities to teach social awareness and social skills** (e.g., how to recognize humor, how to join a game, how to apologize, how to respectfully say you don’t want to play with someone).
- **Provide opportunities for choice.** Allowing partial participation (e.g., being invited to the opening circle, but having the option to “pass”) or offering a choice (e.g., play basketball on the court or sit over here and do Legos) can help students feel more comfortable and in control.
- **Consider culture and lived experiences as an influence on challenging behaviors.** Understanding the context for a child’s refusal to follow through with a request may change staff members’ perspectives — and help them identify an appropriate response or modification.

Continued on next page

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (continued)

- **Provide time and space for staff to talk about their experiences working with students with disabilities and why they think children may be struggling.** Being able to process challenges outside of the moment allows for clarity and problem-solving among staff.
- **Provide consistent program routines and structures.** This includes having the same staff and volunteers with students and following a daily schedule.
- **Break activities into steps, and provide support for each step.** Often, the most challenging steps in terms of student behavior are starting and wrapping up an activity. To help things go smoothly, provide specific instructions such as “Everyone should select six markers and one piece of paper, any color” or “Please pick up five pieces of trash and put them in the waste basket, now that snack time is over.”
- **Allow adequate time and repetition to learn new skills.** Students may need more than one explanation of how a game or activity works. A staff member might repeat the instructions to everyone or ask a student to demonstrate or explain the steps, or a staff member or a student might work individually with any child who needs extra support to get started.
- **Recognize each student’s skills and gifts,** and provide opportunities for each to have a leadership role.
- **Be proactive:**
 - Anticipate when and where a student may have difficulties.
 - Help students express feelings in appropriate ways.
 - Provide alternate activities if a student is overwhelmed.

Facilitate Positive Peer Interactions

- **Teach all staff and students a shared communication system.** If one student uses a nonverbal communication system, such as sign language, be sure everyone knows how to sign at least a few key phrases. In some situations, the students might be the best teachers.
- **Create a culture that encourages friendship and supports children.** Provide direct instruction for students so they know how to share personal stories, how to show kindness and compassion, and how to invite a friend to a social event. Don’t focus on games with winners and losers or selecting team members by popularity.
- **Create space for peer interactions and friendships to take place.** Recognize that one goal of any activity should be to build peer relationships. If students are engaged in a meaningful discussion, hold off on starting the activity and appreciate the positive interactions.
- **Encourage a community of allies in your classroom.** Programs like the Safe and Inclusive Schools program at Hayward Unified School District in California (<http://www.husd.k12.ca.us/SISBPE>) focus on building empathy skills among students.

Expectations and Agreements

- **Create opportunities** for students to participate in their governance by working together to design classroom agreements. Provide poster board for students to write down the agreed-upon rules, have everyone sign it, and post it in a prominent location for reference.
- **Clarify expectations.** Remember that some expectations relate to socialization with others (e.g., using respectful language) and some relate to executive functioning (e.g., listen to all rules before starting the activity).

Continued on next page

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (continued)

- **Simplify demands** for students who have difficulty with multistep instructions.
- **Use written rules or instructions**, supplemented with visual images whenever possible. A sequence card with the steps of Four Square or Go Fish may be helpful as a student learns the rules of the game, for example.
- **Adapt rules in board games.** For example, adjust Trivial Pursuit so that players can earn a pie on any space (once for each category), instead of only when in the middle. This shortens the game and offers quicker gratification to participants.
- **Use “first, then” statements** for students who need rules and expectations broken down so they can follow them. For example: “First put your book bag in the cubby, then go wash your hands.”
- **Create signals** to remind children of rules or expectations. A staff member might tug on his ear to indicate that a student is speaking too loudly for the setting.



YOU FOR YOUTH

Interested in checklists on other inclusion topics? All *Lessons From the Field* topical guides on inclusion contain checklists like this one. The guides are available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

This publication was produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-ESE-13-C-0071 with Leed Management Consulting, Inc. (LMCi). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

Contributors include Alfred Vitale and Jennifer Lapointe (LMCi); Anna Luther, Alissa Marotto, Kathryn King and Mary Shea (Kids Included Together); and Sherri Lauver, Nancy Balow, Miranda Cairns and Carla McClure (Synergy Enterprises, Inc.).

Suggested Citation

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Academic Improvement, “Supporting Social-Emotional Learning (Topic Guide 10),” *Lessons From the Field: Serving All Students, Including Students With Disabilities*, Washington, D.C., 2016. Available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.