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Teaching Children Kindness & Empathy Using Social-Emotional Learning

By Jennifer Gunn

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Teaching kids about empathy, kindness, and compassion is a must for schools. More than **one out of every five students** report being bullied. Of those students:

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- 13% were made fun of, called names, or insulted
- 12% were the subject of rumors
- 5% were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on
- 5% were excluded from activities on purpose

Here's a look at the research, and how to introduce a kindness and compassion strand to your SEL practice.

Why Social-Emotional Learning?

[Promoting Social and Emotional Learning](#) defines “social and emotional competence” as “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development.” Research shows that SEL in the classroom has long-term effects into adulthood. A recent [study](#) by the American Public Health Foundation found connections between social-emotional skills taught in kindergarten and positive adult outcomes including “education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.”

When students explicitly learn and practice kindness, serotonin levels increase, leaving them more open to academic learning. “The [neuroscience](#) and social science research is clear,” says Dr. Patty O’Grady in *Positive Psychology in the Classroom*. “Kindness changes the brain by the experience of kindness. Children and adolescents do not learn kindness by only thinking about it and talking about it. Kindness is best learned by feeling it so that they can reproduce it.” Research by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development Task Force states that academic learning is “possible only after students’ social, emotional and physical needs have been met.” Therefore, teaching kids about empathy, kindness and compassion in school is essential to the [development of social-emotional intelligence](#) in young children and adolescents, and this social-emotional learning sets them free to achieve academic success.

Model kindness and compassion

Have you ever found yourself gossiping about a coworker, rolling your eyes at someone, or mocking someone’s voice? Kids pick up on everything. They use our behavior as a barometer for their own interactions in the world. It’s crucial for educators to model kindness and compassion, especially when they’re feeling angry or challenged. Watch your facial expressions, your tone, and your reactions to emotional challenges. Model your own compassionate practice in front of your students.



Teach students how to *recognize* negative emotions

Teach your students to *recognize* their emotions, not just *react* to them. This can start by clearly stating your own feelings to students: “I am feeling a little angry right now. So I’m going to take a nice deep breath to calm myself down and then we can talk.”

When a student is displaying their own negative emotions, ask them to explore and identify their feelings. “What emotion do you think you are feeling right now? Why do you think you might be feeling this way?” Or, take a group of students outside to observe the nonverbal cues of others and ask: “What emotion do you think that person is feeling right now? What makes you say that?” Next, help students make connections between their emotions and subsequent reactive behaviors. “I’ve noticed that sometimes you throw your papers on the floor when you’re frustrated. Why do you think you do that when you’re frustrated? When you feel yourself getting frustrated, what else could you do?”

Teaching empathy and interconnectedness

Help young students recognize the impact of their emotions and actions upon others. Ask: “When you were feeling mad, I noticed that you pulled her hair. How do you think that made her feel?” Or “When you felt embarrassed, you made fun of him. How do you think that made him feel?” According to Dr. Daniel Siegel, author of [The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind](#), “When children are interconnected, in tune with others, and have the capacity to be reflective, it increases empathy and understanding for the self and others. The ability to be reflective and to understand the self and others is what builds resiliency.” Educators can assist students to become reflective about their emotions, empathetic and aware of their relationship to others, and more resilient as a result.

- [Teaching Empathy to Preschoolers](#)
- [Teaching Empathy: Activities for Elementary Students](#)

MINDFUL KINDNESS CHANT

An [activity that teachers can use at any grade](#) is the Mindful Kindness Chant. It's a quick and simple way for students to express kindness and compassion for others. Start by asking students to imagine someone in their lives who could use some kindness. The person they choose can even be someone with whom they have a negative relationship. Then all together as a class or quietly to themselves, say: "May they be happy. May they be healthy. May they be safe."

Throw around some compliments – literally

This is an easy kindness-themed game to play in the elementary or secondary classroom. Have students form a circle and pass around a talking piece or a ball. The student passing it should offer a kind compliment to whomever catches the ball.

Want to build in time for kindness-based community building on a weekly or monthly basis? Check out these [fun activities for spreading kindness](#).

More resources

- [5 Simple Kindness Classroom Activities](#)
- [Free Lesson Plans for Kindness](#)
- [Secondary Kindness Lessons](#)
- [Sesame Street Kindness Survey](#)

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also cofounder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation, and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.



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