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Book Review: Engaging Children in Social Emotional Learning

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Art as Voice: Creating Access for Emergent Bilingual Learners

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Engaging Children in Social Emotional Learning

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In many developed countries, including the United States, public schooling curriculum in the 21st century values traditional subject matter more than social and emotional skills. This focus on academic learning comes from the narrow view that schooling be for economic purposes and global competitiveness. While these are valuable goals, education must also have goals centered on equipping the next generation with skills for living a healthy and productive life. This entails learning how to make good judgements, calm fears and anxiety, self-regulate, demonstrate leadership, and think critically and creatively.

As a parent and professor of elementary education, I want my child and all children to develop skills for living a happy and productive life in an ever changing world. Parents and educators must teach our children social and emotional learning (SEL) in our homes, classrooms, and athletic-fields. The authors of *Child's Social and Emotional Well-Being: A Complete Guide for Parents and Those Who Help Them* give us a valuable resource for engaging in this work. Their book centers on SEL to prepare children for well-being. They define well-being as “the psychological capacity to cope with the demands arising across time, circumstances, and setting” (Dacey, Fiore, Brion-Meisels, 2016, p. 2). In the book, the authors give step-by-step instructions for exercises that foster children's SEL. While the audience for the book is parents, the exercises are adaptable for classroom teachers, coaches, and counselors working with children ages four to sixteen.

The book's introduction links environment with brain development, as well as discusses “the interdependence of academic learning with SEL” (p. 7). It also gives a brief history of the SEL movement. A catalyst for this movement was Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. Daniel Coleman build on Gardener's views of intelligences and coined ‘emotional intelligences’ and furthermore with the assistance of others developed the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

Following the introduction, the book is divided into five parts: Part I Self-Awareness, Part II Self-Management, Part III Social Awareness, Part IV Relationship Skills, Part V Responsible Decision-Making, and Part VI Achieving Your Goals Even More Effectively. Parts I through V describe sets of skills for building character; practicing mindfulness; calming fears and anxiety; independent thinking; self-regulating; competing and cooperating; preventing being bullied and not becoming a bully; building successful friendships; demonstrating leadership; thinking creatively; and thinking critically and wisely. Within each part, the authors discuss the sets of skills through their experiences, expertise, and pertinent professional literature. In doing

so, the authors share this important information in an unambiguous and pragmatic way. Exercises are given for parents to use to engage children in SEL. An average of nine exercises are supplied for developing each skill set. For each exercise, the authors give a recommended target age range, goal or desired outcome, materials needed, script, and ideas for adapting the exercise with a different age group. The exercises are well explained and seem engaging for children.

In Part VI, the authors give concrete actions for parents and educators to take in order to achieve their goal of supporting the social and emotional development of their children. As a parent and educator, this section resonated with me as it highlighted the value in collaboration. We often tackle endeavors on our own, and this reminded me of the importance of seeking support from other parents, caregivers, and educators. It also reminded me to harness the valuable resources of organizations. This work is very important and challenging, so we must seek opportunities for collaboration.

The authors conclude the book with a positive look to the future of SEL. They state that “the beginning of a tidal wave of support for SEL can be discerned in scholarly journals, professional blogs, newspaper articles, on the agenda of parent-teacher organizations, and in conversations along the sidelines at school sports events” (p. 221). While I admire the authors’ wishful thinking, and keeping with the authors’ use of the metaphor of a tidal wave, I believe that the massive wave of support for SEL is still merely ripples in a sea of schooling initiatives and learning expectations. These ripples do lapse the coastline in the form of dedicated parents, caregivers, and educators seeking opportunities to support children’s SEL. However, the tidal wave of support for SEL will not hammer the coastline of public education and erode the beachfront of academic curriculum anytime soon. This will likely not happen until policymakers and legislators see that schooling purposes are broader than merely economic goals and global competitiveness. Until this shift in thinking occurs, I advocate for parents and educators to make a conscious effort in supporting the development of children’s social and emotional well-being. Dacey, Fiore, and Brion-Meisels’s book is an invaluable resource for those seeking to engage in this important work.

References

- Dacey, J. S., Fiore L. B., & Brion-Meisels, S. (2016). *Your child’s social and emotional well-being: A complete guide for parents and those who help them*. West Sussex, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.