

Modeling SEL in Interactions with Students and Families

As staff members develop their understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL) and self-awareness of their strengths and areas for growth, a next step is to recognize opportunities to embody SEL in professional interactions with colleagues, with students, and with students’ families. This professional learning activity can be used in an all-staff meeting or professional learning community to collectively discuss how school staff model social and emotional competencies in their interactions with the students and families they serve.

This activity should be used after staff have had an opportunity to engage in [foundational learning on SEL](#). This activity may also be combined with a process for developing [Shared Staff Agreements](#), or for engaging staff in [Reflecting on Personal SEL Skills](#). While this activity is targeted around modeling SEL in interactions with students and families, it can be adapted or expanded to include considerations for how staff will model SEL in their interactions with colleagues, community partners, etc.

Time: 1-2 hours

Materials and preparation: Poster/chart paper, markers, and handout: CASEL’s SEL Framework ([download here](#)).

- Write each of the [five social and emotional competencies](#) (and optionally, the [five focal constructs of transformative SEL](#)) on large poster paper and hang them up around the room.
- For Part 2, you will need to display a video from YouTube, and a second set of posters as described in step 7.

Part 1: Modeling SEL with Students

1. Welcome staff and ask them to reflect on the quote: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them (James Baldwin in “Fifth Avenue, Uptown” published in *Esquire*, July 1960).” Ask staff to find a partner and share what this quote means to them and how it relates to promoting students’ SEL.
2. Review each of the [five core social and emotional competencies](#) and [how they connect to student outcomes and lifelong success](#). Prompt staff to think about how students learn these competencies in many ways – through classroom lessons, through afterschool groups, and by “imitating” the way that adults model these competencies. Ask staff to do 1-minute free write to reflect on one way they demonstrated a social and emotional competency when interacting with students in the previous week.
3. Divide staff into five groups and assign each group to one of the SEL competency posters (i.e., “Self-Awareness,” “Self-Management,” “Social Awareness,” “Relationship Skills,” “Responsible Decision-Making”.) Give staff 5 minutes at their poster to collectively brainstorm what staff members could do or say to model this competency in their interactions with students. As they brainstorm, a notetaker in each group should record their ideas on the poster paper. After five minutes, ask the group to move to the next poster, read what the previous group has written, then build on their ideas or add new ones. Rotate until each group has gone to every poster.
4. Provide an opportunity for staff to do a “gallery walk” around all five posters. After a few minutes, ask staff members to reflect on the following questions in pairs or trios, then ask for a few individuals to share ideas with the whole group.
 - What did you see in the gallery walk that felt familiar – something you or your colleagues are doing now in your interactions with students? What felt like something new, that you hope to do more often?
 - In what situations is it easy to model SEL? What are some factors that makes it difficult?
 - When staff members model SEL in interactions with students, how does it impact students?

Part 2: Modeling SEL with Families

5. Transition to this next part of the activity, saying something like,
Our daily interactions with students have an immediate impact, but we only see them for a few hours a day. Our most important allies in supporting students' social and emotional development are their families and caregivers. By embodying SEL in the way we interact with families, we strengthen our partnership with them by building trust and authentically listening. Modeling SEL in interactions with families doesn't mean we're demonstrating how to use a skill, it means that we're exercising our own social and emotional skills to be respectful, responsive, inviting, and receptive to their partnership.
6. Share this video: [Meet April Ybarra \(2:17\)](#), and ask participants to reflect – How did school staff exhibit social and emotional competence in the way they understood and communicated about her daughter? How did that impact April? How could this influence the school-family relationship?
7. As participants discuss these questions with a partner or in writing, add a second poster next to each competency poster in the gallery (based on questions from [Mapp & Bergman, 2021](#), p. 12)
 - **Self-Awareness:** Am I seeking and receiving input from *all* families?
 - **Self-Management:** What steps can I take to more equitably engage families?
 - **Social awareness:** How do I ensure families believe that their concerns are a priority for me?
 - **Relationship Skills:** Do I demonstrate to all families that I care for their children and for them as people, and for their well-being?
 - **Responsible Decision-Making:** How do I include families meaningfully in planning, understanding feedback, and improving?

Divide participants into five smaller groups again as in step 3. Ask them to consider the reflection question and brainstorm things a staff member might do or say with a parent or caregiver to embody each social and emotional competence and invite authentic partnership. Rotate groups to each poster, then offer a few minutes at the end for a gallery walk.

8. After staff return to their seats, ask them to write on a post-it one specific way they will model SEL in their interactions with students, and one specific way they will demonstrate SEL in an interaction with a parent or caregiver in the coming week. Ask staff members to choose a partner, share what they wrote on their post-its, and schedule a time in the coming week when they can check in with each other and discuss how the interaction went.
9. After this activity, your SEL team can synthesize and type up the ideas to create printed posters or one-pagers that can be distributed to all staff, used in team meetings, and/or displayed in staff work rooms. A summary could also be provided to students and/or their families to communicate that this is an area of focus for the school and preview that the team will be seeking their feedback about relationships and climate later in the year. You can use the template on page 3 to create a summary. You can find a completed example on page 4.

Blank Template:

SEL Competency	How will we model this competency in our interactions with students?	What will we do or say in interactions with parents and caregivers?
Self-Awareness	•	•
Self-Management	•	•
Social Awareness	•	•
Relationships Skills	•	•
Responsible Decision-Making	•	•

Sample Completed Template:

SEL Competency	How will we model this competency in our interactions with students?	What will we do or say in interactions with parents and caregivers?
<p>Self-Awareness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify and name emotions in the moment: “I feel ___ when things like this happen.” ● Ask students for feedback on your instructional practices: “I tried something new today with this activity. What did you think? Should we do it again?” ● Admit mistakes and say how you’ll make things right: “I’m sorry I was in such a rush that I forgot to greet you this morning. If you have a few minutes after class, I’d love to hear how your baseball game went yesterday.” ● Notice and communicate that you value the personal, cultural and linguistic assets students possess and bring with them into the class community. ● Identify and discuss your strengths and limitations: “I recognize that I have a hard time with ___ so I’ll have to take some time to reflect before we talk again.” ● Reflect on your own cultural lens and identify biases that may exist as a result of that lens. ● Build awareness of how your emotions impact students. ● Notice events and ideas and how your body responds to them. ● Notice personal behaviors, tone of voice, and personal affect that arise with various emotions/situations. ● Demonstrate a growth mindset by describing your own process of continuous improvement or overcoming a challenge: “When I first started taking Spanish in college, I was so nervous to talk in class and it took forever to do my homework, but by the end of the year...” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Notice which families we have the most positive interactions with, which families we have the most negative interactions with, and which families we interact with very little. Reflect on how this connects to our identities, biases, choices, and explicit or implicit communication. ● Consider how similarities and differences between us and parents/caregivers may influence perceptions and comfort level with communication.
<p>Self-Management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discuss how you set and plan to achieve personal goals and how you improve your own practice: “My teaching goal this year is to design lessons that let you have more opportunities to collaborate with one another. Will you help me brainstorm how I can reach this goal?” ● Demonstrate self-regulating and calming strategies in age-appropriate ways: “I’m feeling a little frustrated, so I’m going to stop and take a breath before I decide what to do next.” ● Acknowledge events that cause stress in your students’ lives and in the community, and model practices for processing and managing stress. ● Ask students for help when appropriate: “It’s my goal to leave ten minutes at the end to check in and wrap up – can you give me a signal if I forget?” ● Approach new or unexpected situations as learning opportunities. ● Model respectful and restorative language when addressing challenges with students: “What’s your perspective about what happened this morning? What do you think should happen to make things right?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Send personalized invitations to all families to invite their questions, comments, and contributions, in home languages. ● Set goals and track data on family engagement (responses to climate surveys, direct contact via phone or in-person conferences, participation in discussion series, etc.).

<p>Social Awareness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make space for and encourage students to take action on issues that are important to them and to make choices in their learning so that their school work aligns with their interests and skills. ● Consider students’ perspectives and understand that everyone has their own set of truths and beliefs based on their own experiences. ● Model upstanding behavior by noticing and addressing bullying behavior. ● Be willing to compromise: “You make a strong point – I’m willing to...” ● Ask students about their experience and perspective first, rather than beginning with your version of events: “We all have a lot of thoughts about today’s news. I’d like to know what’s on your mind.” ● Model appreciation and acceptance of others’ beliefs and cultural differences. ● Reflect and admit when you have treated others unfairly and try to repair harm. ● Treat students’ families and community organizations as partners who can support your work with students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Respond to calls/notes/emails promptly, even if just to let them know that you need more time to find an answer. ● “Last week we touched base about _____. I wanted to check in and see how it’s going. Do you feel it has been resolved?”
<p>Relationship Skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greet students by name daily. ● Build a connection with someone in your school with whom you do not normally interact. ● Take time to reflect on potential outcomes before responding to challenging students. ● Get to know students and allow them to get to know you within your individual comfort level and appropriate boundaries. ● Model fairness, respect, and appreciation for others. ● Provide opportunities for students to work together and give specific praise for strong teamwork and collaboration: “I saw how you built a plan and divided responsibility so everyone could work to their strengths.” ● Acknowledge the efforts of others with encouragement and affirmation: “I notice you stepped out of your comfort zone when you volunteered to act out that scene. You’ve really grown.” ● Intervene when you hear language that is racist, sexist, ableist, or homophobic, or when you see a student being targeted by peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What would you like me to know about your child? What works best for your child to help them learn and feel comfortable in the classroom?” ● “How are you doing? Are you getting what you need from our school to meet your needs and the needs of your child?”
<p>Responsible Decision-Making</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Model problem-solving strategies, like gathering all relevant information before drawing a conclusion. “I didn’t see what happened. I’ll need to hear each side of the story before we can brainstorm some solutions.” ● Transparently incorporate student suggestions and perspectives when making decisions that impact the classroom and make decisions collectively when appropriate: “I’m making a change to the homework policy based on the suggestions you shared last week.” ● Consider legal and ethical obligations before making decisions. ● Consider how your choices will be viewed through the lens of students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “We want to host an event to help families understand their children’s math scores and the supports we have available. We’d like to hear your thoughts on logistics, questions to prepare for, and how to make the event really useful and engaging.” ● Include families in reviewing school climate data and determining priorities for next year.