

SOCIAL
EMOTIONAL
HEALTH
LESSONS
Middle School

What is Social Emotional Health?

Social emotional health is the ability to manage one’s emotions, reactions and relationships.

Children with strong social emotional health demonstrate self-control, communicate well, problem solve, are empathetic, respectful, grateful, gritty and optimistic — traits we admire in the people with whom we want to work and maintain friendships.

The four lessons included here will help children learn about important social emotional health skills such as building positive interactions with others, solving problems and advocating for change.



Table of Contents

1. Inside My Heart	1
2. Positivity Ratio	5
3. Problem Solving	13
4. Advocacy	17

1. INSIDE MY HEART

Description

This lesson provides students with the opportunity to share about themselves.

Objectives

1. Teachers will help students feel seen, heard and valued.
2. Teachers will strengthen the student-teacher relationship.
3. Students will be able to share about their values, feelings and passions.

It's important to learn this because...

Teens, like adults, are multi-faceted and often don't reveal their full selves to adults.

Materials Needed

Inside My Heart Handout (page 4)

What You Need to Know

An integral part of who we are and who we can become is rooted in our values. Values are ideas that we adopt about what is important and what is right. Values aren't something that we think about on a daily basis, but they are at the core of how we live.

A teenager's value system is shaped by many things: typical adolescent development, his family's beliefs and values, his culture and heritage, his experiences with others including friends, and societal messages.

Adolescents are in a unique period of life where they are seeking new experiences and exploring who they are and how they fit into the world around them. During this time, they turn more to peer influence and depend less on parents and adults for emotional support. The behaviors of adolescents often leave many teachers and parents scratching their heads in wonder and disbelief. Often, interacting with middle school students can feel like a rollercoaster. The ups and downs with them can be a frustrating cycle that doesn't seem to end. The truth is that this is normal behavior that can be attributed to a brain that is under construction.

Dr. Dan Siegel, a child psychologist and researcher, identifies a few noteworthy behaviors that occur during adolescence.

Social Engagement

Teens are forming stronger relationships with their peers while shifting away from parents and other adults. This can be a good thing, because these connections help teens have a needed support system. On the other hand, teens who pull away from adults and authority figures forfeit having the benefit of experience and expertise from people outside of their immediate social group. For example, when a teen needs advice about dating, he or she may only be talking to friends who have limited experience with relationships.

Emotional Intensity

Teens often feel intense emotions – they can feel the height of happiness and the depth of sadness – sometimes on the same day! Their emotions can often seem extreme for the situation. Emotional intensity benefits teens because it provides them incredible energy and excitement for life. Yet, sometimes their intense emotions can also cause them to be moody and act impulsively.

Novelty Seeking

Teens are highly rewarded by the brain, and by social situations, to take risks. They seek out new, fun and thrilling ways to enjoy life in the moment. But in doing so, they often fail to accurately assess the potential risks– or they simply decide that the thrill outweighs the risk.

Creative Exploration

The adolescent years are a time to be curious about life and explore creative interests to see what they enjoy. The other side of this exploration is that it can be a confusing time. As they explore the world around them, engage with peer groups and listen to other cues about who they are, they can internalize negative messages from the media, social media, peers and adults. Negative messaging is everywhere in a teen's environment.

Because teens are leaning into peer relationships and away from adult relationships, they often reveal only a portion of their true selves to their parents and teachers. We don't often know what their driving value systems are. However, when we can find a way to connect with teens, we can strengthen the relationship and develop a sense of trust and security.

The Lesson

Give students the chance to voice what they feel inside their hearts. You may be surprised to learn what they care about and why! This activity can also elicit information about contextual factors that may be influencing a student's behavior.

This activity is meant to be done privately between the student and the teacher. Students will respond differently if the activity is going to be seen by their peers. Conversely, if they understand that the teacher is using it to learn more about them and develop a relationship, the student is more likely to be honest and reveal more.

You may wish to say:

I know some things about all of you, but there's lots I don't know! I want to know more about you because when we get to know each other better, we can work together better. I am going to give you a sheet with a heart on it, and I would like you all to complete this sentence: "If people could see inside my heart, they would see..."

What are you passionate about? What makes you feel excited? What do you struggle with? What makes you feel scared? What things are most important to you? Whatever you feel in your heart, write or draw it inside the heart. Only I will see your paper; we won't hang these up or share them with the class, so feel free to be honest.

This assignment can be done in class or can be taken home and returned. When you collect the hearts, take time to look at each one and reflect on it. What information can you glean from each student's heart? Does anything surprise you? Did you learn anything new?

Privately, try to connect with each student about something you saw on their heart sheet.

Name: _____

Inside My Heart

If people could see inside my heart,
they would see:



2. POSITIVITY RATIO

Description

This lesson promotes positive interactions between students and teachers.

Objectives

1. Teachers will reflect on the way language can shape behavior.
2. Teachers and students will reflect on relationships in their lives.
3. Students will learn about the brain's negativity bias.

It's important to learn this because...

The brain is naturally wired to retain negative experiences over positive, so teachers must be intentional about creating positive experiences to help develop safe relationships with students.

Vocabulary

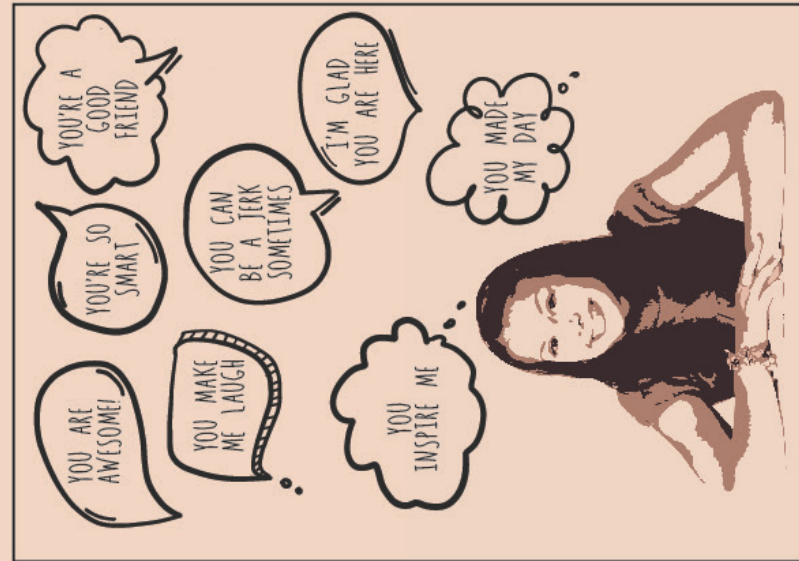
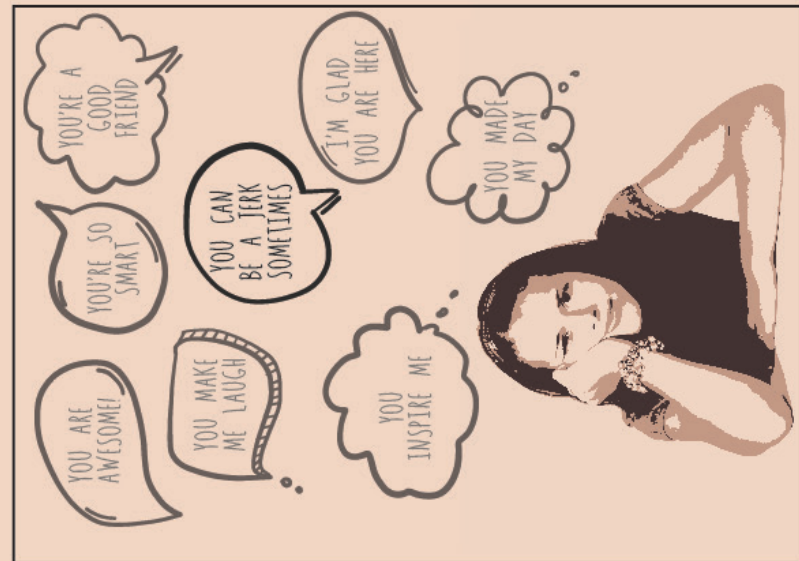
Negativity Bias

Materials Needed

Comic strip (page 6)

Handout (pages 9-10)

Appreciation strips, enough for each student to have a few (page 12)



What You Need to Know

The brain is wired to retain negative experiences. This is an evolutionary feature of the brain, designed to keep us safe from future harm. Imagine that you've discovered a new walking path near your home. You head out on your walk, and you're enjoying the scenery. It's a clear day and the path is beautiful. You're daydreaming about making this your Saturday morning routine. Near the end of the walk, the path turns a corner and has a steep decline. The terrain is rugged and you slip and fall, injuring your back. When you get home, what do you think you will remember about your walk that day? Do you think your brain will replay the story of the beautiful scenery, or do you think it will recall the injury? How likely are you to revisit that path again? The brain's tendency to focus on the negative is designed to protect you from getting hurt by reminding you that the path is dangerous. Dr. Rick Hanson calls this the "negativity bias". He describes the brain as Velcro for the bad and Teflon for the good. Bad experiences stick with us; positive experiences slip away.

Because of the negativity bias, people are more affected by negative things than positive. When you receive a performance evaluation, do you remember the 10 compliments you receive, or the one piece of constructive feedback?

One way to overcome the negativity bias is to focus more on the positive. Dr. John Gottman says there must be five times more positive interactions than negative interactions to sustain a healthy relationship. His work is based on romantic relationships, but this idea of a 5:1 ratio can easily be extended to working with children of all ages.

In Stephen R. Covey's book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the relationship is seen as a bank account. Each interaction we have with people is either a deposit (a positive experience) or a withdrawal (a negative experience). In order to have solid relationships, we need to make more deposits than withdrawals.

In the classroom, it is important to have more positive interactions than negative. For example, if a student is disruptive, a teacher can address the behavior (withdrawal) and then find several ways to give compliments or encouragements (deposits) before the end of class. We don't want the bank account to be in the negative!

The Lesson

Show students the comic strip on the following page. Give them a moment to read through it. Then, discuss the comic strip as a class.

You may wish to say:

What do you notice? This teen hears a lot of different messages through his day, and even though most of them were positive, he ends up focusing more on the negative. Has that ever happened to you?

The brain is actually wired for negativity. What does that mean? It's our brain's job to keep us safe. It remembers negative experiences so that we won't make the same mistakes over and over again. Just like in the comic strip, our brain is constantly searching for negative in order to protect us. If we're always looking for the negative, what do you think we will find? (Students should respond, "negative.")

Do you think we can change this about our brains so that we can look for more positive things? We can! We can do this by intentionally focusing on positive things.

Explain to students the idea about relationships as a bank account. Encourage them to contribute to the conversation by giving examples of deposits and withdrawals.

You may wish to say:

Today we are going to think about some relationships that we have in our lives in terms of a bank account. When we have positive interactions with people, it's like making a deposit into a bank account. When we have negative interactions with people, it's like making a withdrawal from a bank account. Who can give me an example of a positive interaction/ deposit? A negative interaction/ withdrawal?

Too many negative experiences, or withdrawals, can make it a difficult or stressful relationship. Take a few moments and think about some relationships you have with people. These can be friends, family, teachers, coaches, etc. Think of four different relationships for this activity.

Have students write the names of the people in the boxes on the handout labeled "relationship 1, relationship 2, etc." Have them reflect on deposits, or positive experiences, they've had with each person. Have them write some down for each person. Then, have them do the same process for negative experiences, or withdrawals.

Students may need help thinking of examples of deposits or withdrawals. Some examples you may wish to share with them include:

DEPOSIT EXAMPLES	WITHDRAWAL EXAMPLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving a compliment • Saying hello • Letting them borrow a pencil • Sharing your snack • Smiling at the person • Including them in a group conversation • Saying please or thank you • Helping them with a problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguing • Saying a mean comment or a put down • Avoiding eye contact • Taking something from them without permission • Spreading rumors or talking behind their back • Not following their directions

NAME:

RELATIONSHIP 1:		RELATIONSHIP 2:	
DEPOSITS	WITHDRAWALS	DEPOSITS	WITHDRAWALS
RELATIONSHIP 3:		RELATIONSHIP 4:	
DEPOSITS	WITHDRAWALS	DEPOSITS	WITHDRAWALS

Overall, did you have more deposits or withdrawals with people? Why do you think this is the case?

Who do you have the most withdrawals with?

What will you do over the next week to build a relationship with that person? (Specific and actionable goal)

If there is a relationship you notice has a lot of withdrawals, or one that does not have as many deposits, an easy way to make a deposit into that relationship bank account is by giving them a compliment. Because we know our brains are wired to look for and remember the negative, today we are going to create an appreciation that we will give to someone. You have two strips of paper in front of you. On these strips you will write two appreciations for two people on your list.

Show example.

I, Mrs. Johnson, appreciate James Patterson because he is always smiling at people and ready to help a classmate out. I think that's really nice.

Have students share out in small groups or pairs.

Processing Questions:

What impact might this type of action have on someone else?

What impact might it have on you?

How can you apply this learning to challenges at home or at school?

I, _____
[your name]

appreciate _____
[other person's name]

because _____

[why you appreciate that person]

I, _____
[your name]

appreciate _____
[other person's name]

because _____

[why you appreciate that person]

3. PROBLEM SOLVING

Description

This lesson teaches students a framework for solving their own problems.

Objectives

1. Teachers and students will relate the problem-solving process to understand a recent difficult situation they have navigated.
2. Students will be able to apply the problem-solving process to a current issue they are facing.

It's important to learn this because...

Knowing how to solve problems is an important life skill as teens face more and more complex problems.

Materials Needed

Problem Solving handout (page 16)

What You Need to Know

When a young child has a problem, an adult will swoop in and solve it. If a baby has a runny nose, an adult will wipe it. If a toddler spills a cup of milk, an adult will clean it up. But when adults have a problem, there's not a magical helper who swoops in and solves it for us. We have to rely on our own problem-solving abilities.

Adolescents are somewhere in the middle. They're learning how to be independent adults, but they're not there yet. Think of them as adults in training. As children grow older, they need to learn how to manage their own problems rather than relying on others to solve problems for them. This is a critical skill they will need as they take on more responsibilities, meet different kinds of people and move away from home.

In the brain, the prefrontal cortex is primarily responsible for problem solving and decision making. We know the prefrontal cortex continues to develop until around age

26. Teenagers are in the brain construction phase. As much as we'd like for them to have sound decision-making and problem solving abilities, they take time and practice. You have the opportunity to provide those opportunities for students and to model good problem-solving skills so that they can make neural connections to be able to access these skills when needed.

The Lesson

Explain to students that you will be helping them think about problem solving. It might be helpful to share an example of a problem you recently solved – something that is simple and relatable. For example, maybe you missed a deadline. Then share how you solved the problem, for example, by making it a habit to check the next day's calendar each evening.

Ask students to reflect on a school-related problem that they have recently faced.

You may wish to say:

Think of a school-related problem you have had recently. Maybe you got a low grade on a test, you had difficulty in a subject, you weren't finishing your homework, you were talking in class, you were tardy, etc. Can you think of something you've struggled with at school this year? This activity will work best if you can think of a problem that you've solved. Try and think about something that was a problem for you, but you worked to figure out a solution. If you can only think of a problem that is still unresolved, that is okay. If you can't think of a problem at school, think of something outside of school, maybe related to friends, family, sports or activities you participate in.

Ask students to write the problem on the first few lines of the worksheet, for example, "Got a bad grade on my math test."

In the first section, have them fill in more detail about the problem. For example, "I usually get good grades in Math. I was busy with soccer practice and I didn't make flash cards like I usually do."

Next, have them identify resources. Who did they talk to about the problem? If they haven't solved the problem yet, who *could* they talk to? For example, the student might say, "I talked to Mr. Anderson and asked if I could do extra credit or make up the test."

Finally, have them consider the process they used for problem solving. How did they decide on a solution? How did they carry out the plan? What were the results? What might they have done differently if given another opportunity? If the problem is still unresolved, have them write ideas for the process they will use.

In the example about the Math grade, this might look like, "I realized that I wasn't planning ahead because I was waiting until the night before a test to study. I made a calendar that

shows when all of my tests are, and so I can see if I have practice or a game the night before a test. That way I know I need to study earlier. After that I started getting good grades again.”

Give students time to fill out their worksheets, and then reflect as a group.

Processing Questions

What was easy about solving these problems? What made it difficult?

What kinds of resources did you use for your problems?

Is this usually how you solve problems in your life?

When you make a mistake in your problem solving or something doesn't go the way you like, how do you bounce back?

What are some things you would like to do differently next time if given the opportunity?

What ideas did you hear from your classmates today that you'd like to try?

Throughout the year, as students encounter problems, have them reflect on the problem with this lens:

What is the problem?

What are the available resources?

What process can they use for solving the problem?

NAME:

A problem I've had is:

<p>PROBLEM (What was it? What information did you have about it?)</p>	
<p>RESOURCES (Who or what did you consult to make the decision or make changes? What factors were the most important?)</p>	
<p>PROCESS (How did you actually make the decision? What were the results? What might you have done different if given another opportunity?)</p>	

4. ADVOCACY

Description

This lesson teaches students how to be advocates for change in the classroom and in the world.

Objectives

1. Students will explore the concept of a rational rider and emotional elephant as they relate to advocacy and mobilization.
2. Students will understand how leadership is important to moving vision and goals forward.

It's important to learn this because...

The ultimate goal is to encourage students to go out and change the world!

Vocabulary

Emotional Elephant
Rational Rider

Materials Needed

Handout (pages 20-22)

What You Need to Know

A key part of social emotional health involves thinking about others. Life is not just about ourselves – it's about ourselves in the context of our environments. We want to encourage students to care about the world around them and become changemakers.

The book "Switch" by Dan and Chip Heath outlines what makes people mobilize around a cause. To illustrate the point, the book divides the human brain into two parts: the rational rider and the emotional elephant. The rational rider is the logical part of the brain that is driven by facts, statistics and data. This is the part of the brain we activate to problem solve, plan and make logical decisions. The emotional elephant, on the other hand, is the emotional part of the brain that is driven by feelings and instincts.

The rider makes the logical decisions and plans where to go, but without the power of the elephant, the rider will not get very far. The rider can push and pull on that elephant all day long but will not have any luck. Instead the rational rider needs to find a way to motivate the emotional elephant. After the rider successfully lays out a vision and motivates the elephant, he needs to look at the path forward to change. Both parts of the brain are important when we want to create change, whether in school, in our personal lives, or out in the community.

The Lesson

Explain to students that they will have opportunities throughout their lives to make the world a better place. They might see something that is unfair towards them or others. They might think of a better way to do something than what is currently being done. Whatever it is, they'll need to learn skills to help advocate for a cause and mobilize people to join them in creating change.

Have them think about something in school or in their community that they would like to see changed. It could be something that bothers them or that they think would make things easier for people. For example, maybe they want to start a new club at school, or fix a hole in the sidewalk on their walk to school. Have them think for a few minutes and share their response with a peer.

Next, have them reflect on what it looks like when that problem is solved.

You may wish to say:

I want you to imagine that this problem is solved. How are people behaving? What is different? What does it sound like? Really pretend that you are there and take in your surroundings. For example, if my answer was that I wanted to fix the chaos in the hallways at school, I can imagine students walking on the right hand side with their hands to themselves, teachers and students using calm voices, and people in their classes ready to learn before the bell rings.

Have them write down a few sentences about what they notice when the problem is solved.

Explain the concept of the rational rider and the emotional elephant. You may wish to say: The first step to create change is to plan a clear path. Imagine an elephant with a rider on its back. The rider is the one who plans the path and tells the elephant where to go. That's the first step – deciding where to go and how we want to create the change. But there's another important step. The rider can plan and plan all day long, but if that elephant doesn't start walking, the rider is never going to reach his destination. Let's call the rider the "rational rider" and the elephant "the emotional elephant". The rational rider plans the way, but the emotional elephant helps get him there.

Think about the stories you see in the news. Do the reporters just list data and statistics? No, they include an element of emotion. They tell anecdotes or interview people affected by the story. This is the blending of the rational rider (the facts) and the emotional elephant (the stories).

In order for people to advocate for change, they need to mobilize people to support them. This is done by relying on the rational rider and the emotional elephant. Share with the class your example of hallway chaos.

You may wish to say:

For example, the rational rider of chaos in the hallways would be that tardies cause students and teachers to lose instructional time. I could be very specific and say that if a student is two minutes late to class every day, that student loses 760 minutes of instructional time over the course of a school year. That's almost 13 hours of school!

Have the students right down the rational rider for their problem. Encourage them to be specific. You may need to assist them with facts and figures or give them an opportunity to research information online.

Next, have them reflect on the emotional elephant.

You may wish to say:

Do you think people are going to be interested in your case yet? Maybe! But maybe not. Statistics and data are important, but people often want to know why they should care about something. We want to share something emotional about the problem to help people understand how it affects them and how their life might be easier if the problem was fixed.

In your example, the emotional elephant might be that standing at the door to monitor the hallways and greet students helped you form great relationships with them, which makes students feel safe and connected in your classroom.

Give them a few minutes to write their responses.

Solicit students to share their problem solving ideas with the class.

Processing questions:

What action steps will you take to continue working on solving this particular problem?
Describe something that pushed you outside your comfort zone.
What personal strengths did you notice in your partner? In yourself?

NAME:

What do you want to change in your classroom, school, personal life, etc.? (Choose just ONE issue.)

ISSUE: The issue I would like to solve is:

Imagine what it looks like when this problem is solved. What do you see? How are people behaving? How are people interacting with each other? What does it sound like?

What potential obstacles could get in the way of making sure your plan for change is successful? How will you address them before they become an issue?

About Momentous Institute

Momentous Institute, owned and operated by Salesmanship Club of Dallas, has been building and repairing social emotional health in children for over 95 years. Since 1968, the AT&T Byron Nelson golf tournament has been its primary fundraiser. The organization serves 6,000 children and family members each year through Therapeutic Services and Momentous School. Building on this direct work with kids and families, the organization invests in training and research, and shares strategies nationwide to reach far more children than could ever be served directly. In hopes of infusing new, exciting ideas throughout the community, Momentous Institute hosts its annual Changing the Odds conference for educators, mental health professionals and decision makers. The combined support of Salesmanship Club of Dallas, the AT&T Byron Nelson, corporations, individuals and foundations enables these efforts and truly changes the odds for kids in our community and beyond.

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