

The Importance of Social Emotional Learning Through Programs like Tools for Life

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Social emotional learning is a major concern for many administrators, teachers and parents of young children. However, the academic curriculum gives little time for teaching skills like social problem solving, cooperation and self-esteem. Yet we still expect students to develop a solid understanding of themselves and how to treat others appropriately. The goal of teaching social emotional learning is to improve students' ability to understand, manage and express their emotions, as well as, to develop an awareness of self, to control emotions, to learn empathy for others, to build relationship skills and to develop problem solving abilities (Borda, 2007). If students can develop emotional intelligence, then they will have a better quality of life, be productive members of society and feel happier (Borda, 2007).

A Lebanon school, concerned that children were being affected by the growing amount of violence in the world and were showing greater difficulty with social problems and a lack of respect for themselves and others (El Hassan & Kahil, 2005) implemented and examined the effect of a social emotional program called, "Living Values: An Educational Program" (LVEP). The LVEP was "...based on the belief in the whole child and provided guiding principles and tools for the child's development" (El Hassan & Kahil, 2005, p. 82). There were many successes in the program including scholastic competence and feelings of social acceptance.

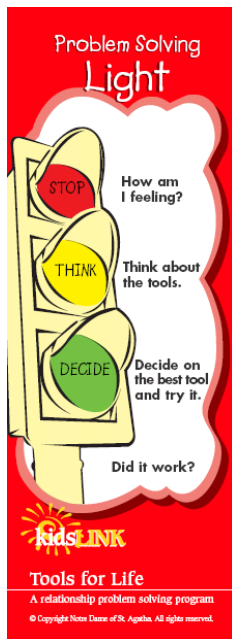
It is understandable then why school faculty and parents want to teach students social and emotional skills. But how do schools incorporate social skills into the curriculum when teachers are already pressured to meet the specific expectations of each subject? The LVEP program required teachers to be highly committed and to be regimented in their delivery of the program (El Hassan & Kahil, 2005). According to Borda's study (2007) programs that teach social emotional learning need to be "planned, ongoing and systematic and then monitored, improved, and refined over time" (Borda, 2007 p. 4). In order for these programs to work, children, teachers, administrators and parents all need to be interested and engaged in the lessons that are being introduced. Many different factors are related to the effectiveness of these type of programs but the most important factor is the strong leadership of the Principal to help promote a climate of change and sustainability (Borda, 2007).

The Early Intervention Early Identification (EIEI) team at kidsLINK has been working in Public and Catholic elementary schools for almost 20 years, teaching relationship building skills to students in junior kindergarten to grade 3. The EIEI team began their mission in 1990 to assist young children work through their relationship problems in a healthy and successful manner. The

program has been implemented in over 70 elementary schools and has serviced over 5000 students yearly since its inception. The EIEI program goals and aims were similar to those of the social emotional programs studied by Borda (2007) and El Hassan & Kahil (2005), with one main difference. The EIEI team supported the schools by directly working with the children in the classrooms, whereas the previously mentioned programs focused on training teachers to do the work.

The talents and expertise of the EIEI team recently led to the creation of a teacher's manual and resource kit, called *Tools for Life*. The *Tools for Life* program provides a preventative resource for classrooms to teach social development, self-understanding, and self-management in a developmentally appropriate way. The *Tools for Life* kit provides a complete package of resource materials that the EIEI Consultant demonstrates in direct classroom work then leaves with the teacher, to facilitate in an ongoing manner. Children learn how to effectively handle social problems and build skills for solid relationships in the classroom, the playground, and at home.

The manuals' main goal is to provide schools with a common social language and philosophy of problem solving. It clearly outlines themed lessons for each grade level so students can learn the common language and messages that will help them become effective relationship problem solvers. "The lessons are the foundation of character development, conflict resolution and peacemaking programs, anti bullying programs, restorative justice and circles programs, as well as anti-drug and anti-smoking programs" (Tools for Life Manual, 2007, p. 5). Importantly, the lessons have been developed to be directly linked to the Ontario Ministry of Education Elementary Curriculum's specific expectations and at each grade level. It also provides assessment checklists for the Ontario Report Card learning skills section so teachers have an accountability tool that demonstrates the student's skill level in each area.



Each grade level has between 8-10 lessons that highlight themes such as; self-esteem, respect, problem solving applications, cooperation and calming down. The lessons incorporate creative and interactive ways to teach students about social skills while tapping into Garner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983). For example, role playing how to use "I message" statements or drawing an individual plan on how to calm oneself when upset. Lessons tend to use examples from children's literature to introduce each new topic and naturally open up discussion between the teacher and the students. The *Tools for Life* manual provides an array of methods to introduce a lesson so that all children can benefit and demonstrate their own strengths while learning a new skill.

Teachers, who have received the program in their class, express excitement about the numerous materials that help to introduce the lesson themes. One adjustment in the *Tools for Life* service model delivery is that teachers are expected to assist in preparation of the program. The goal of this is to encourage teachers to play a more active role in the class presentation of the *Tools for Life* lessons. In order to begin to create sustainability in the school the teachers are expected to continue to teach from

the *Tools for Life* manual throughout the year and to also deliver the lessons themselves for the class the following year.

The kit contains visual material, such as posters, to act as a resource that can continually be referenced throughout the school day. Also, there is a “feelings beach ball” that encourages students to share when they have had a particular feeling. The students are taught that all feelings are natural and can be expressed in more appropriate ways. The feelings wheels help students identify how they are feeling when they are having difficulty expressing themselves. These resources are just a sample of some of the items included in the *Tools for Life* kit. The resources naturally promote open communication and the sharing of feelings and thoughts within a safe, comfortable framework. It is hoped that the activities will encourage the students to generalize the learned communication and problem solving skills to the playground, the hallways and at home. However, continuous modeling and teaching is required to foster development of the long term integration of these skills. El Hassan and Kahil (2005, p.88) believe that if social emotional learning is continuously taught and modeled as the children go on in each grade there will be “...discernable improvements in the tone of the school, the outlook and the level of emotional competencies of the (students) who take these courses” .



The lessons within the program lend themselves to further instruction and the opportunity for teachers to add their own creativity and ideas. The manual provides structured lessons on how to introduce themes and skill development. This year the EIEI consultants have had the pleasure of watching many teachers incorporate their own creativity into the program to extend the learning and the experience of their students.



*Mrs. Wiebe’s Grade 3 class (Williamsburg School) and their success statements from Tools for Life Lesson # 3. *Personal Put up Tree*

In a grade 3 class at Williamsburg Public School (WDSB) one teacher took the self-esteem lesson where each student was encouraged to write a “put up” (positive message said to another person to make them feel good) about themselves and added her own spin on the lesson by posting all of



their statements on the leaves of a tree hung in the room. Her extension acts as a continuous reminder to her students that they should be proud of themselves.

Other schools, have decided to adorn their hallways with “put up” chains listing all the positive things that we say to one another to create a positive climate and remind the students of the power of words.

The *Tools for Life* program recognizes the need to extend the common language and philosophies of relationship problem solving to the students’ home. In the manual there are black and white copies of the posters that frame the major themes that are discussed during *Tools for Life* lessons. Teachers are asked to send a letter and poster home that explains the purpose of the lesson and the major ideas that were taught. This not only provides the opportunity for parents to discuss what was learned in class but to also implement similar techniques for skill building at home.



The *Tools for Life* incorporates a “Family Night” where the Principal can arrange to have the EIEI Consultant come to the school for a dedicated evening where the students can teach their families about how they successfully navigate themselves through different problems they encounter. It is a powerful evening that truly lets the children demonstrate their understanding and knowledge about *Tools for Life* and how they can become an independent problem solver.

The *Tools for Life* project has been highly accepted and appreciated by teachers and principals in our local area. It has strengthened the partnership between the EIEI program the Catholic and Public Boards of Education, and the Ministry of Education. It can easily be adapted to the curriculum of other educational regions. As a result, data is being gathered and follow up research will determine the overall effectiveness of the program. Due to popular requests, future versions of the *Tools for Life* kit are being developed for use in other settings, such as home and child care centres.

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All resources are culturally competent

www.toolsforliferesources.com