

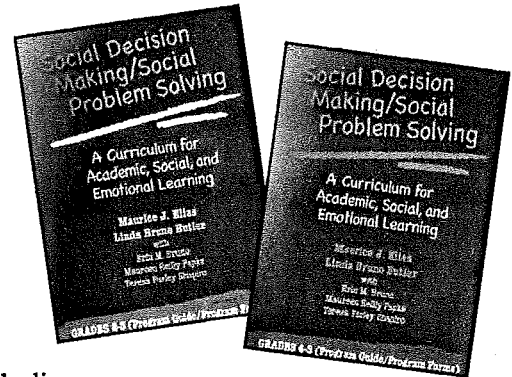


# Social Decision Making Social Problem Solving

**A Curriculum for Academic, Social,  
and Emotional Learning**

Dr. Maurice J. Elias and Linda Bruene Butler  
with Erin M. Bruno, Maureen R. Papke, and Teresa Farley Shapiro

**NEW — Sept/2005**



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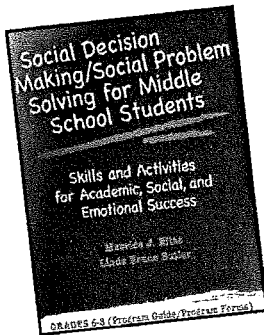
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Dr. Maurice J. Elias and Linda Bruene Butler

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## **The SDM/SPS–Academics Connection**

Integrating SDM/SPS into the academic work of students builds their social-emotional learning (SEL) skills and enriches their academics by linking cognitive, social, and emotional processes. Readiness skills are essential for students to accomplish the following academic and learning tasks, among many others too numerous to list here:

- Understand assignments and test instructions accurately.
- Examine passages of text patiently and extract necessary information across a wide range of academic subject areas.
- Delay gratification long enough to think about difficult choices on exams or to prepare well for those exams.
- Participate in cooperative learning groups.
- Complete homework and short- and long-term projects in an organized way.

Beyond the readiness skills, the critical thinking skills denoted by FIG TESPN are the cornerstone of academic understanding and sustained achievement. This is true both in terms of mastering the intricacies of any subject area and in terms of addressing the numerous everyday decisions that are part of life in school and among peers and family. Consider how well a student would function with deficiencies in any one, two, or three FIG TESPN skills. Imagine if the deficiencies occurred in only two or three school or home situations. Is there any doubt that the student would be at risk for academic difficulty, for substance abuse, and for not functioning as a healthy, productive adult citizen? Hence, applications to academic contexts are a regular feature of SDM/SPS, building a broad array of literacy skills in students. As noted earlier, Tables 2 and 3 outline how each of the Topics in the Grade 4 and 5 curricula link with a range of academic areas.

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## **THE SDM/SPS INSTRUCTIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH**

In addition to direct instruction and application of a decision-making process, students also benefit from having external coaching and facilitation of their learning. This process is carried out through a form of pedagogy refined over many years to help teachers systematically guide and coach students to use their SDM/SPS skills in a variety of situations. For this reason, the pedagogy of SDM/SPS is of equal importance to the activities and essential if SDM/SPS is to be implemented effectively and internalized by students.

### **Gathering: The Sharing Circle**

Whether one calls it a Sharing Circle, Morning Meeting, Sharing Time, Advisory Group, Circle Time, or any of a number of related titles, the reality is that students welcome the chance to come

together informally to address issues of emotional concern. Students benefit from a buffer between socially challenging parts of their day—preparation for and trip to school, lunch and recess, and dismissal—and applying themselves to serious academic work. For this reason, schools find it useful to have gatherings to start the school day, after lunch and recess, and at the end of the day. Such activities recognize and help to implement three essential SEL principles (from the "Lessons for Life" Video-Inservice Kit for staff members new to SEL, National Center for Innovation and Education, [www.communitiesofhope.org](http://www.communitiesofhope.org)):

- *Caring relationships form the foundation of all lasting learning:* Gatherings bring everyone together and make a statement that while agendas are important, relationships come first. They also set a climate in which learning is most likely to be internalized and lasting.
- *Emotions affect how and what we learn:* Academic work cannot proceed when students' emotions are churned up, when they are anxious, fearful, or angry. The group focus during start-of-day gatherings is on providing an opportunity for some expression of concern, or at least using a ritual beginning to give students a chance to get their own emotions regulated a bit. By so doing, they are better prepared for the academic tasks ahead of them. At the end of the day, addressing students' emotions makes it more likely that the day's learning will stick, and good intentions with regard to homework and projects and such will get followed through on.
- *Goal setting and problem solving provide direction and energy to learning:* Gatherings provide a chance to reaffirm common goals, set personal goals, work on issues of general concern, or make the transition into the SDM/SPS activity about to be undertaken. Gatherings also reinforce goals by providing opportunities for testimonials about progress on projects and attempts to use new skills, and for students to get feedback on aspects of SDM/SPS that are proving difficult.

It is this flexible use of gatherings that led the activities in the SDM/SPS curricula to be called Topics rather than lessons. Sometimes the immediate needs of the group, including the need to review what went on in the prior meeting, will make it impossible to complete the day's planned activities. However, because the emphasis on SDM/SPS is in long-term, generalizable skill development, when a choice exists between deep learning and coverage of more topics, the former is preferred.

### **Caveats: Taking Care with Student Disclosure and Student Hurt**

In Sharing Circles or other gatherings, as well as in problem-solving discussions, some students are likely to want to share family or other personal home circumstances with peers. It is important to set up ground rules, from the very beginning, that family matters should not

be topics of general discussion. Further, many groups establish a rule that they will not talk about people who are not in the room at the time. That being said, you will also want to be sure to convey to students that they can and should individually approach you, a counselor, school psychologist or social worker, or other school professional whenever they are facing difficult personal or interpersonal problems or circumstances.

These considerations are especially powerful when students are coming to class with a great deal of emotional hurt. Often, they are in need of opportunities to express their strong feelings. And they may try to do so despite warnings that such personal disclosures are not appropriate for the group. Try to be aware of what is happening in the lives of students and offer those who are dealing with difficulties chances to meet with you or another member of the school staff on an individual basis. Your alertness to both quiet and overt signs of distress can make a large difference in the lives of students. The work of the PassageWays Institute is a valuable resource to teachers in addressing these concerns ([www.passageways.org](http://www.passageways.org)).

### **The Facilitative Approach of Open-Ended Questioning**

From the SDM/SPS point of view, the main role of the teacher is neither to solve students' problems nor to make decisions for students. Instead, teachers are facilitators of students' own decision-making and problem-solving skills. (This approach is analogous to the old adage about the relative merits of teaching people to fish and of catching fish for them.) The facilitative approach involves asking questions, rather than telling. However, questions are not all the same. Consider four types of questions:

- *Closed*: "Did you hit him?"
- *Interrogative*: "Why did you hit him?"
- *Multiple choice*: "Did you hit him because he was teasing you or because of something else?"
- *Open-ended*: "What happened?"

Closed questions require a yes or no or other one-word response from students and do not elicit much reflection. "Are you angry?" will elicit much less information than a question phrased in an open-ended manner, say, "What feelings are you having?" Students often do not react well to "why" questions because their insecurity can lead them to feel defensive and blamed. Most students are usually not aware of, or able to articulate, the deep reasons behind their actions; this is especially true of students with behavioral and emotional difficulties.

An honest response to "Why did you hit him?" is something very few students will offer: "Because I lack self-control and have an inconsistent social learning history with regard to getting negative consequences as a result of my violent actions" or "I think it comes from a

chaotic home, some poor parental modeling, and an overexposure to movies, TV, and videogames that glorify aggression, with inadequate adult supervision." By contrast, open-ended questions such as "What happened?" are apt to maximize a student's own thinking about the problem. Further, getting students more invested in the problem-solving process leads them to feel more ownership of and responsibility for the solution.

Giving students several choices from which to select certainly still has its uses—for example, with students who need to be brought along as problem solvers, are immature or have cognitive limitations, or are initially resistive or draw blanks to open-ended questions. And at times, teachers will have to tell students the answer in an authoritative way. What SDM/SPS pedagogy recommends is that teachers first try to *ask* open-ended questions, then *suggest* options from which students can choose, and then *tell* students, if necessary. Cognitive choice is good exercise for students' intellects, as well as for their social-emotional skills. SDM/SPS activities accomplish this by structuring the initial questions teachers ask, both verbally and in written formats, to be open-ended.

### **The Two Question Rule: A Specialized Questioning Approach**

The Two Question Rule is a powerful, simple way to stimulate students' thinking. In leading a group discussion, the rule is to *follow up a question with another question*. It reminds the teacher to stay in a questioning mode, and it serves notice to students that the teacher is genuinely interested in hearing details. For example, "How are you feeling?" can be followed up by "What other feelings are you aware of?" "What are you going to say when you go up to the lunch aide?" can be followed up by "How exactly are you going to say it?" In an academic context, "Why do you think the character in the book acted in that way?" can be followed up by "What do you think the character will do next?" Or "What are the ways that the body regulates temperature?" can be followed up by "How do you know that is true?" That last follow-up probe—"How do you know that is true?"—is an especially useful tool for grounding and clarifying students' thinking. Overall, the more students elaborate on their ideas about a problem or issue under consideration, the better understanding teachers have of what students mean and what they are taking from the discussion. The Two Question Rule is valuable for clarifying students' thoughts, feelings, goals, and plans.

### **Role-Playing, Rehearsal, and Practice**

Role-playing provides an opportunity for students to rehearse and practice the responses they would make in actual interpersonal situations. Many students find this activity an enjoyable and valuable supplement to classroom discussions. For teachers, it is an opportunity

to give students supervised practice and feedback in reacting to a simulation of everyday events. Four basic steps are involved in a role-play, and these can be explained to students:

- Prepare the script.
- Run through the action.
- Action on the set.
- Review the performance.

### Prepare the Script

Select a relevant interpersonal situation and establish the problem and conflict. Choose participants who are willing to accept roles and are likely to handle the roles successfully. Do not place students in roles that reflect their typical situation or approach. Carefully explain the overall situation and the expected actions of each character. Characters should have distinct feelings, motives, and goals in the situation. Where applicable, students should know what alternatives to state and what consequences to expect. There is a clear analogy here with the script of a play.

### Run Through the Action

This rehearsal has two aspects. First, have the class discuss the situation and encourage audience participation and constructive suggestions during the run-through process. Be prepared to model, or to have students model, specific examples of any desired behavior that will be the focus of the role-play. Then have the actors discuss among themselves what they will say and do and how they will do it. Have them practice expressions of feelings, verbalize alternatives, or run through any other parts of the overall situation that you feel require emphasis.

### Action on the Set

Have the students enact the situation. Teachers are director-coaches and should feel free to help the actors portray their roles as the action is occurring. By actively coaching, you are providing students with feedback and support. This makes role-playing less threatening and confusing for them and also helps move the action along. Discontinue role-playing if a student shows any sign of emotional upset or if the actors (or children in the audience) begin acting in a silly or off-task manner.

### Review the Performance

After the performance, have the audience share their views of the thoughts, feelings, and actions expressed by the characters. Students can also be asked how it felt to be involved in, or to watch, the role-play. A valuable way to provide closure is for the teacher to discuss

how the role-play could be done differently in the future, emphasizing how the various skills the students are learning fit together.

To help students get started, you can share the four-step outline with them and then proceed by introducing a situation to role-play. Choose a situation such as one of these:

- You have a new student in your class, and you want to make that student feel welcome.
- You are having trouble doing a math problem, and you want to ask the teacher for help.
- You are a new student in the class and want to make friends.

Choose volunteers and brief the role-players on their parts. Have them plan what they will say and possibly let them rehearse by themselves. Many topics will feature role-play as part of skill building and practice for generalization.

### Questions About Role-Playing

Teachers new to role-playing often have questions about how it will fit into classroom activity. For example:

- When would I use role-playing?
- What exactly does the audience do during the role-play?
- What if students are reluctant to become involved or are not ready?

#### **When would I use role-playing?**

Role-playing is useful to:

- Highlight personal feelings and those of others when involved in a problematic situation.
- Act out a possible solution to a problem and make it more real.
- Compare two or more solutions.
- Teach planning skills.
- Teach reactions to obstacles.
- Help children integrate their various social decision making and social problem solving skills.

#### **What exactly does the audience do during the role-play?**

Members of the audience should be assigned specific points to observe. This focus will keep them actively involved in the process so they don't just watch it like something on TV. Here are some of the major categories:

- Verbal or nonverbal behaviors such as BEST: body posture, eye contact, content of speech, and tone of voice. (See Tables 2 and 3 for topics in which BEST is presented.)
- Specific social decision making and social problem solving steps. (Specify which ones to watch for.)

- All social problem solving steps.
- One actor. (Specify which one.)
- All actors.

Of greatest importance is that students learn to give positive feedback before making any critical comments or suggestions. Teachers should be sure that reviews of performances begin on a positive note. Over time, this encourages the class to work as a problem-solving team and to participate in the role-plays.

**What if students are reluctant to become involved or are not ready?**

By following the procedures outlined earlier, especially running through the action and coaching while the action is occurring, teachers ensure that most students will wish to be involved. It is also important to establish a positive working atmosphere in which students know that teasing or ridicule is not tolerated. Beyond this, teachers should attempt to gradually phase students into more and more direct involvement. Role-playing with puppets is often a good beginning point for a reluctant class. Students also enjoy making the puppets. Observation of a videotaped interaction also helps sharpen students' skills at observing and giving feedback. A student can also be assigned a specific observational task, such as watching for signs of feelings or for verbal behaviors. The student can be asked to report these observations during the review. Finally, reluctant students can play the parts of extras—people in nonspeaking parts, such as bystanders or passers-by. One of the most successful ways to gently encourage participation is to say to a student, "Do it as if you were . . . [a sports figure, actor or actress, cowboy, musician, school principal, or some other role the student will be able to identify with]." Teachers can judge from students' reactions to these gradual steps when they might be ready to move into greater involvement.

## **USING THE FOUR "R'S" TO AID RETENTION**

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Forgetting and confusion will inevitably interfere with learning, much as occurs in the context of other school instruction. Therefore, activities are designed to reflect four "R's" that can increase retention: review, repetition, reminders, and reinforcement.

### **Review**

Each meeting should include a review of both group discussion rules and what occurred in the preceding meeting. This helps bring people who missed that session up-to-date and also lets the teacher accurately gauge the group's starting point.



## Repetition

Especially with youngsters in lower elementary grades, our recommended procedure is to maximize tolerable repetition. Many students' attention, memory, or depth of understanding is not sufficient to permit one-trial learning. They benefit from repetition through different modalities (speaking, reading words, viewing pictures, pantomiming, singing, and whispering) and from different sources (teacher, group of peers, dyad).

For the most part, teachers do not repeat *all* the lessons from one year to the next. Rather, a developmentally sequenced flow is designed for each grade. However, a key aspect of instruction, we have found, is children's own maturing ways of responding to situations. Therefore, there will be times when similar content is presented from one year to the next, with the goal of helping children deepen and elaborate their repertoire of feelings, thoughts, and actions around that content. It is also the case that students tend to appreciate structure. Therefore, instruction in most topics begins with a Sharing Circle and a review of the previous session. These features are not described in detail in the instructional activities sections because the review segment will be tailored to each unique classroom context.

## Reminders

In our view, the elementary school years are best viewed as a skill acquisition period. It is not consistent with developmental or educational expectations to look for significant internalization and generalization of skill concepts based solely on their presentation in the classroom lessons. The more children are reminded by group leaders, classroom teachers, aides, peers, bus drivers, building administrators, counselors, and others to use their new skills, the more likely they are to find them salient and worth remembering and developing further. The most effective reminders are tangible ones, such as posters depicting the skill components (such as keeping calm, having a successful conversation, or going through the steps of making a sound decision). As an example, teachers using our program have made signs showing ways to get help, both in words and in pictures, and have referred students to these signs when they seem in need of help. Posting stories, worksheets, or other products generated from SDM/SPS activities also serves as a tangible reminder of the skills. In addition to the classroom, other good locations include guidance offices, group rooms, the main office, and hallway bulletin boards.

## Use of Prompts and Cues

Prompts and cues are defined as special types of reminders composed of verbal requests or directives to use a certain set of skills. The set of skills generally has components that have been taught in formal

group meetings, and the total sequence of these components is given a label. (For example, the components of the skill of self-calming are given the label "Keep Calm.") Nearly all the readiness topics contain labels that can be used as prompts or cues. Here are some examples, along with indications of when to use them:

- *Speaker Power*: A sign not to talk out of turn.
- *Listening Position*: A cue to sit up and orient attention appropriately.
- *Keep Calm*: A prompt to use deep breathing and "self-talk" to calm down.
- *Be Your BEST*: A prompt to behave in a polite, socially acceptable way, attending to body position, eye contact, speech, and tone of voice.
- *Problem Diary*: A way of monitoring personal problems and a tool for thinking about them (by writing a diary) and, at times, for planning ways to handle them.
- *Role-Playing*: A set of behaviors to enact a problem-solving situation and to take others' points of view.
- *Teammate Behavior*: A prompt to think about how one relates to others and how to maintain a positive relationship or change an unsatisfying one.
- *Giving and Getting Help*: A prompt to share one's problems and to be willing to help others solve theirs as well.

Examples of situations in which to use prompts include these:

- Two children are arguing over a pencil; you see the situation escalating.

*Prompt: "I would like to see you both use Keep Calm. . . . Now, let's see what happens if you two try to Be Your BEST."*

- One child is squirming around while you are reading something to the class.

*Prompt: "I will continue when everyone is in Listening Position."*

- A child runs to you, upset about a problem; you are not able to deal with this outburst right now.

*Prompt: "I can see you were really hassled. Please go fill out a Problem Diary and then come back and see me, and we can talk about it."*

- One child is being led astray by another, and you are concerned about it.

*Prompt: "Is Billy your friend? What good Teammate Behaviors does he use? What does he do that are not Good Teammate Behaviors? How do you feel when he does these things?"*

## Testimonials

To capitalize on the known potency of peer modeling as an influence on learning, it is advisable to regularly incorporate testimonials into readiness lessons. Testimonials are opportunities for students to tell about situations in which they used skills that they have been taught. A teacher might say, "Let's go around and have everyone share a time in the past week they used 'Keep Calm' or tell about something that happened to you or something you saw where 'Keep Calm' or 'Be Your BEST' might have been helpful."

The reports of the students sharpen their recognition of suitable times to use the skills, provide examples of how the skills can be used in practice, and, for the teacher or group leader, give an opportunity to provide feedback and encouragement that will help promote further skill use. Testimonials may be conducted as part of the Sharing Circle or as a second activity. Some teachers prefer to elicit testimonials on non-lesson days as a way of extending students' involvement with the material.

## Reinforcement

The fourth "R" reflects learning theorists' belief that, in the absence of incentives and feedback, proper skill learning is unlikely to occur. Group leaders and others in the students' environment should be alert to their attempts to use their skills. At such times, the attempt should be reinforced with praise or whatever tangible rewards may be applicable in the setting. The opportunity should also be taken to provide specific feedback about which of the students' behaviors would be worth remembering and repeating on future occasions.

If the students can handle it, it would be beneficial to add constructive feedback about what might be useful to try next time to make achievement of goals more likely.

## **THE APPLICATION PHASE: INFUSION INTO ACADEMICS AND EVERYDAY INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS**

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A particular area in which the SDM/SPS approach is distinctive is the way in which the skills are integrated into everyday academic and interpersonal contexts in classrooms and schools. A teacher who wants to build students' SDM/SPS skills during language arts, health, social studies, civics, science, art, gym, or music will find well-articulated strategies and activities to help this take place in what we call the application phase.

The application phase of SDM/SPS instruction provides students with ongoing opportunities to apply and practice skills taught in the readiness and instructional domains in real-life situations and within the context of academic content areas. Practice is accomplished through

a combination of structured practice activities and lessons and facilitative questioning on the part of adults.

### **Structured Practice Opportunities**

Relevant curriculum materials can be found within many of the Topic areas (see Tables 2 and 3) and are emphasized in Supplemental Activities. They take the form of a wide variety of sample structures, frameworks, and materials for infusing a decision-making approach into instruction in almost any subject area, as well as a method for addressing real-life problems and decisions. These lessons and methods are easily adapted to address specific instructional objectives and are flexible enough to use with a variety of content themes, topics, stories, and situations.

For example, worksheets and procedures from Topics for a decision-making approach to social studies or for analyzing literature can be used, with minor variations, with a wide variety of specific topics addressed in social studies or history or for a variety of authors and works of literature.

The FIG TESPN framework can be used to help students think more deeply about and personalize issues in a way that strongly fosters retention and internalization of knowledge. Brain research has provided many insights into how to create more vivid and sustained learning situations, and these are built into the SDM/SPS approach. Consider a series of FIG TESPN-derived questions focused on the topic of immigration or explorers:

1. How did the people feel about leaving their countries? How might you have felt?
2. What countries were they leaving?
3. What problems were going on that made them want to leave?
4. What problems would leaving bring about?
5. What would have been their goals in leaving or staying?
6. What were their options, and how did they envision the results of each possibility? What do you think you would have done?
7. What plans did they have to make? What kinds of things got in their way at the last minute? How did they overcome these roadblocks? How else might they have tried to deal with their situation and solve their problems?
8. Once they arrived, how did they feel? What problems did they encounter at the beginning? What were their first goals?

To help students find fact-based answers to questions posed and check their own views, further reading and research can be assigned. And there are obvious parallels to be drawn in the context of understanding the current diversity of one's classroom, school, or commu-

nity. Note that students from Grades 2 through 8 can answer the same basic set of questions, bringing to it knowledge, experiences, concerns, and ideas that reflect their developmental differences.

Consider an application-phase approach to holidays or ethnic and cultural commemorations, such as African American History or Latino Heritage months. After students learn some background, you can use FIG TESPN questioning to help students think—as a whole class, in cooperative learning groups, or individually—about how members of different groups feel about the holiday and how they might celebrate it. First, students begin with the group's celebrating the holiday. Then, to broaden their perspectives, they are asked to take the perspectives of other groups—for example, those who are not African Americans, African Americans who lived before the Civil War, people in the United States from different countries. Students can think about alternative ways to recognize events and the consequences of doing so, and then can plan their own way to recognize the event.

The application of frameworks taught in the curriculum can extend to unanticipated events in the life of the classroom, school, or nation. Although the evidence is only anecdotal, there is reason to believe that schools in which SDM/SPS and related SEL programs already existed were well able to address and respond to the events of September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in rural Pennsylvania. Teachers were prepared to address the social-emotional needs of students while the mental health and crisis teams were still being organized and mobilized. FIG TESPN and related problem-solving strategies were used as tools to help students sort through an incredibly complex and charged set of facts and feelings at appropriate developmental levels. Perhaps most important, the tools of SDM/SPS were found to be instruments not only of reflection but also of action. Students were helped to think through how they would cope with the situation immediately and then what they could do to help. And the problem-solving and decision-making approach continued to be used regularly in the days afterward to continually enhance children's understanding and channel their need for contribution.

Similar applications have been made in the context of bullying and school tragedies, as well as in planning positive schoolwide events.

### **Encouraging Students to Be Thoughtful Decision Makers and Problem Solvers**

The SDM/SPS approach is built on promoting generalization and application, and for this, confidence building is essential. Foremost, teachers, counselors, other implementers, and parents are encouraged to communicate with students in a manner that stimulates students' own thinking. Through the use of open-ended questions and dialogue that facilitates students' higher order thinking skills ("What are all the ways that you can think of to handle that problem with

Lee?"), adults keep the channels of communication open. They let students know that they *can* solve their own problems and that their ideas are worthwhile. Moreover, students see adults around them listening to them and caring about and respecting what they say. In this situation, students feel a sense of empowerment. In addition, they are learning skills they can use every day. They are prompted, coached, and guided to practice the skills, and are given feedback aimed at helping them increase their effectiveness. Success is an important source of confidence, but so is praise for effort and progress that gives students the expectation that they are on a pathway to success. This is an important message for self-doubting students, who may be prone to see even a 90 percent full glass as 10 percent empty.

Because SDM/SPS is grounded in the social world of students—even when applied to academic areas—students who otherwise seem disaffected, unengaged, or at high risk feel included. Many teachers find that social decision making activities lead to increases in students' involvement in cooperative learning activities. Thus it is more than the content of social decision making that is important in skill building. The instructional principles built into every activity that follows from the social decision making tradition are designed to enhance a range of social and life skills and build self-confidence by helping students recognize that they are valued members of something that is worthwhile. Whether it is being used in a classroom, group, club, advisory, counseling, or clinical context, or in after-school programs, the SDM/SPS approach helps students (and adults) become part of a cooperative problem-solving and decision-making team. It is the powerful combination of direct instruction and external support that has led to significant and lasting student skill gains using the SDM/SPS curriculum.

## **Modeling**

Instruction is important, but seeing adults use problem-solving skills is much more effective than just telling students to problem solve on their own. As students hear adults try to use SDM/SPS skills, they realize that it is normal to have negative feelings, that adults do not always have the perfect solution right at their fingertips, and that adults turn to problem solving when they face difficult situations or choices. Teachers need to find ways of modeling aspects of the program. When introducing a skill, teachers can discuss times they used the particular skill in their own lives. When a conflict takes place, teachers can talk about how they are calming themselves down and using the skills in the curriculum to address the situation. And when staff members interact with one another in the presence of students, it is important to take a positive, respectful, problem-solving approach, even during disagreements.