

Skills are systematically taught and labeled with skill prompts that provide a consistent language for calling on the skills and reinforcing their use in the classroom and throughout other aspects of the school day. First, we will visit a few classrooms to see what this looks like in action. Then we will take a look at how the program works at the school-building level to extend and deepen classroom-based skill-building efforts.

SYSTEMATIC SKILL BUILDING IN THE CLASSROOM

Let's start our visit by taking a look at Mr. Ahmad's class as he reviews a skill that he taught on the first day of class. He is reviewing the skill of *Listening Position*. Listening Position is a skill that teaches children to stay focused on the speaker and on task. By demonstrating the skill when asked, students become able to access the skill on their own at the appropriate time (during instruction or teaching time, etc.). Helping students to understand the "why" of a lesson is an important aspect of building a skill. Mr. Ahmad has now invited his class to play a round of Simon Says. Take note of the processing questions that follow the game.

"Okay class, we are going to play Simon Says. This is not a high-stakes game, so I'm going to ask that if you are out to please sit down. You may still play the game in your seat, but I'd like for you to sit down. Are you ready?" The game is played like Simon Says, with Mr. Ahmad saying "Simon says 'Pat the top of your head.' Simon says 'March up and down.' Simon says 'Pat your tummy.'" He says, "Do this," pointing to and doing a variety of movements. Students are reminded to sit if they "do" a movement when Simon didn't say. When there are about four students left, Mr. Ahmad asks them to sit and tells them the game is now over.

During the processing of the game, Mr. Ahmad asks his class "What did you need to do to stay in the game?" Children answer, "Keep my eyes on the teacher," "stay focused," "be quiet," and "listen for what Simon said to do." "OK, we are going to try the game again. This time, remember to use Listening Position and the other ideas you heard your classmates mention, to help you stay in the game longer."

Classes invariably do better the next time, and the time after that. With occasional repetition, listening improves in other areas of classroom life. After each practice, Mr. Ahmad processes and then makes connections to learning in class. He elicits from students the ideas that these are the very things they need to do to be good students. They need to be focused on the teacher or whoever is speaking, not talk, and remember the rules that apply to the situation. These questions answer the "why" questions many students have in regard to learning a skill or a subject area lesson. At various times during every school day, he asks students, "Are you in good Listening Position?"

Building a skill is a six-step process:

The first is to introduce the skill. "Today we're going to learn a skill called Listening Position."

Second, motivate the learners by giving them a reason why learning the skill will benefit them. Mr. Ahmad used the game of Simon Says to engage and motivate students in reviewing the skill of Listening Position.

Third, present and model the behavioral components of the skill and explore examples of not using the skill. Mr. Ahmad showed the class what a good

Listening Position looked like and what a poor one looked like. Through the processing of Simon Says, the students explored firsthand what might happen if they became inattentive (they would have to sit out the game).

Fourth, Mr. Ahmad provides opportunities for students to practice and provides performance feedback. He compliments students who demonstrate the skill properly and reminds those who do not of what they need to do.

The fifth step is to give the skill a prompt or cue phrase, which in this case is "Listening Position."

The sixth step shows Mr. Ahmad using the cues for practice at the start and end of each class, including allowing students to identify groups that are demonstrating good Listening Position as a criterion for who gets dismissed first.

Now, let us move down the hall to the health class, where we can observe another example of systematic skill building.

Ms. Brodka's Health Class

As we walk into this lesson, we find that students are learning to become self-aware of feelings triggered by stressful situations. Students are learning how to identify physical signs of feelings that signal that a strong emotion has been triggered (set off) by an event. The following line of questions lead children to understanding why this skill is essential. Ms. Brodka asks, "How do you feel when someone calls you a name?" "Upset," "angry," and "sad," different children respond, each taking turns holding a "Speaker Power" object. "Great! Where in your body do you feel upset, angry, and sad? For example, when I'm angry, my face gets hot or sometimes my head hurts." Once again, hands go up, and the object is given to a boy named Shaun. "I feel it in my hands—they clench up!" Another boy, Sal, waits to receive the object and then says, "I feel it in my head—it pounds!" "This is excellent," exclaims the teacher. "Now what do you do to make those physical signs go away and feel better?" Shaun says that he sometimes hits people with his clenched hands, and Sal says that he yells out mean things to people when his head hurts. "And do you feel better?" "No, I get in trouble."

Ms. Brodka next teaches the class a way to calm their emotions. It is a skill called *Keep Calm* from the SDM/SPS curriculum (Elias & Bruene Butler, 2005). She models the skill by breathing in for 5 seconds, holding for 2 seconds, and then exhaling for 5 seconds. She repeats the skill several more times, slower each time. Next, she asks the class to practice it with her. Handing the object once again around the class, she asks students to tell how they felt as they did the *Keep Calm* skill several times. Ms. Brodka then shows the class her *Keep Calm* area where students can go when they need to calm down.

Mrs. Fehn's Math Class

Looking in now on a fifth-grade class, we can see Mrs. Fehn preparing a class for a math test. She is standing before the class and is asking her students to take a deep breath, hold it, and then exhale. They are doing the same skill of *Keep Calm*, however this time, it is to prepare the students to take their test. Mrs. Fehn has found that many of her students freeze up on tests, and many perform poorly due to anxiety about test

taking. Consistent practice—plus the fact that many of these students have learned and practiced this skill for at least 2 or 3 years—makes it easier for each student to become calm and more able to perform proficiently for tests. This is true for classroom unit tests as well as high-stakes standardized tests. Her class is beginning to transfer the skill of Keep Calm to academic situations in which they might become stressed.

OVERLEARNING SKILLS AND CONCEPTS IN THE CLASSROOM

In health class, two skills were demonstrated from the SDM/SPS curriculum. Speaker Power, which is a visual object passed to students to speak or share questions or answers in class, reinforces the character trait of respect. Speaker Power is controlled at first by the teacher. After practice and classwide success, the class may take control of the object, passing it among themselves, reinforcing the criteria for receiving the power to speak and developing respect for the speaker.

The other skill demonstrated in both the health class and in the fifth-grade class was Keep Calm. Keep Calm is a skill that helps children learn to regulate their emotions in stressful situations. When they are able to perform Keep Calm properly, they will become more rational decision makers and problem solvers in social situations, especially when under pressure. This skill is prompted on a regular basis by a teacher or any other adults in the building (or other students who are part of the “Keep Calm Force”) when a child exhibits physical signs of upset feelings. As multiple adults in the school environment use and reinforce the same prompts and cues over time, students’ overlearning of skills is more likely. This is likely what accounts for the SDM/SPS program’s consistent findings of generalization to everyday academic and social behavior.

Once skills (in this case, Speaker Power and Keep Calm) are taught in the context of formal lessons, they are then integrated into many areas of a student’s school day for continued practice. Speaker Power and Keep Calm can be applied while learning lessons in health, while learning in the regular classroom, when students are participating in group work, or even during a disagreement on the playground, cafeteria, or classroom.

All three of these classrooms give clear examples of how individual skills such as Listening Position, Speaker Power, Identifying Physical Signs of Feelings, and Keep Calm are taught, overlearned, and reinforced in the classroom. Now, let’s see how some additional skills from SDM/SPS are integrated into other areas of academic content.

INTEGRATION OF SKILLS INTO ACADEMIC CURRICULUM FOR INCREASED PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

The next class you are about to visit will be integrating the readiness skill of “BEST” into a language arts class. BEST is an acronym for Body posture, Eye contact, Say appropriate words, and Tone of voice. This skill teaches children to monitor these four aspects of behavior so they can deal with other people in a respectful way.

Special emphasis is placed on helping students be appropriately assertive when confronting other people, rather than aggressive or passive. Students are taught to become aware of staying in their own space, holding eye contact, selecting their words carefully, and checking their tone of voice so that they do not repel the person they are trying to connect with.

The students have been reading a book called *Molly's Pilgrim*. As we enter, we see a role play with two students. Connie (playing the part of Molly) is walking up to Edward (acting the part of Molly's teacher) and saying in a very aggressive voice and moving into his personal space, "Those kids over there are making fun of me because I look different than they do! You'd better do something about it!" Edward says to the child, "I think you had better go back and try this again and use a better tone of voice." Connie comes back and tries it again, this time standing in her own space (B), looking into the teacher's eyes (E), putting the problem into words (S), and using a normal tone of voice (T). Edward, as the teacher, replies and reflects back what Connie said: "Thank you for telling me. Now, I will go over and talk to the children who were judging you by your outside rather than by your heart. I will let you know how it goes."

This teacher took the skill of BEST and used it to do three things: (a) to reinforce and provide an opportunity to practice the skill of BEST, (b) to allow students an opportunity to critique aggressive behaviors and consequences, and (c) to provide a forum for continued practice of a social skill through the use of literature. In other words, it put a social skill into an academic context. (It is also worth noting that during the role plays, other students in the class are assigned to watch the BEST behavior of the role players and give feedback afterward, thereby keeping everyone involved in skill building.) *This can also be seen in the following social studies class.*

Mr. Lerner is doing a unit on the civil war.

While each group is working on solving their group's problem, a young boy named Ben is seen walking over to an area set up in the back of the room. His head is down, and he is mumbling to himself. He sits down, pulls out a piece of paper that looks like a worksheet, and begins filling it out. When he is finished, he goes back to his group and is seen talking to his group using a normal tone of voice.

Ben has just filled out a *Problem Diary* in a Keep Calm area in the back corner of the classroom. A Problem Diary is a form that has each of the steps in the SDM/SPS decision-making process typed on it. A Problem Diary can be used in two ways: first, as a way to reflect on a poor decision already made, and second, as a way to head off a troubling situation by thinking ahead about positive solutions and consequences. In Ben's case, he knew he was feeling angry, and rather than saying or doing something that would get him in trouble, he decided to go to the Keep Calm area and figure out what his goal was and what solutions he could attempt to reach his goal, envision consequences, and select the best one. Filling out the Problem Diary also helped him defuse his emotions so that his solutions were not being controlled by angry feelings.

IMPLEMENTATION THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Now that we have observed a few examples of how some of the SDM/SPS skills are integrated in the classroom, let's take a walk through the halls of Schuyler School so

that we can observe some other ways students are practicing their SDM/SPS skills beyond the classroom door.

Walking into the school counselor's office, it is obvious that SDM skills and activities are a central component of the comprehensive school counseling efforts in this building. Skill posters, problem-solving worksheets, and lists of problem-solving groups indicate that the skills are used in the context of individual counseling sessions and small-group counseling. The school counselor also relates that FIG TESPN as an eight-step thinking framework and other skill prompts are infused in lessons conducted by the counselor in classrooms addressing academic, personal, and social and career development topics.

The National Standards for School Counseling ideally position the school counselor as the SEL coordinator in a school building (Bruene Butler, Poedubicky, & Sperlazza, in press). The counselor in this building also coordinates other programs to support students in practicing social decision-making skills in unstructured situations such as in the cafeteria, on the playground, and in their relationships with their peers and teachers. The counselor also coordinates training and supervision (with the support of other teachers) of students participating in the Keep Calm Force, peer mediation, and safety patrol. The Keep Calm Force is a group of students who act as peer reminders to other students to use Keep Calm in stressful situations while on the playground or in other unstructured settings. Peer mediators use a variation of FIG TESPN to assist students in conflict to think through the problem and negotiate solutions.

The school counselor takes us across the hall to the SDM lab (SDML; Elias, Hoover, & Poedubicky, 1997; Poedubicky, Brown, Hoover, & Elias, 2000–2001). The SDML is a place where students are given a structured opportunity to apply their SDM/SPS skills to real-life situations that have resulted in the need for discipline or self- or teacher referral for an identified problem. The SDML is operated by trained facilitators from the local university, businesses, and community; volunteer teachers; and teacher's aides. Older students who have been through and benefited from the lab sometimes act as peer coaches during lunchtime hours. Students are taken through a problem-solving process through computer software (Elias, Friedlander, & Tobias, 2000; Friedlander, 1993).

As we leave the SDML, we walk pass the music room and the gym. We stop to talk to the teachers. Both the music and physical education teachers report that they use the SDM/SPS skills and prompts on a daily basis. For example, the music teacher has adapted Listening Position to *Singing Position* and incorporates Keep Calm as an integral part of all performances. The physical education teacher also uses the Keep Calm prompt continually to focus athletic performance, for example, prior to taking a foul shot in basketball or batting in softball. Also, BEST is used to enhance team sportsmanship. The physical education teacher also emphasizes BEST when students are in the role of referee.

We end our visit at the principal's office. There, we find out that the assistant principal and principal use these skills and skill prompts with students, staff, and parents in discipline situations with students, to provide support with strategies to parents, and at staff meetings, by using the FIG TESPN framework to develop plans related to professional development, curriculum, and school improvement. As we leave the school, we also notice a flyer announcing a workshop for parents. There, they will learn about ways that they can help coach their children and have demonstrations and practice opportunities based on *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*

(Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 2000). A Web site is also posted at www.EQParenting.com to obtain further information.

CONCLUSION

As we bid a farewell to this short but informative visit to Schuyler School, we have a better understanding of what it takes for students to internalize social-emotional skills and use them in the service of good character. This is not something that is left to chance; programmatically and systemically, children are taught and provided opportunities to practice skills on a daily basis. In this school, it started in individual classrooms, with caring teachers such as those we visited. Over time and with collaborative effort and planning on the part of a team of educators, the entire school has become involved in building skills that will help children become productive adults who demonstrate good character. Many other schools have gone down this road, led by caring teachers. The same can happen to you.

Authors' Note: Ongoing information about all aspects of Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving can be found at www.umdnj.edu/spsweb.

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