

Social Emotional Learning
Soft Skills for School and Life

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Soft skills are a combination of social skills, work habits, communication skills, character traits, and attitudes that enable people (and students in particular) to work well with others and manage the demands of learning and working. It is difficult to acquire the “hard skills” (e.g., learning to read, write, solve equations, understand basic principles of physics, etc.) if a student hasn’t developed the soft skills to enable the process of learning new things. After students have acquired the “hard skills” to move on to higher education or to move into employment; success at that next step becomes exceedingly difficult without soft skills. In fact, soft skills are more often the obstacle to success than the hard skills that are taught as part of education and training.

Below are some examples of such “soft skills” and some of the skills in each major category are further described with specific detail in the box across from the listed skill. This is done to illustrate how any targeted skill can be further broken down and described in enough specific detail to enable specific intervention within the classroom. You may reference various documents related to this article to see suggestions about how to incorporate soft skills in the classroom (Soft Skills Applications, Soft Skills Proficiency, Soft Skills Reinforcement Programming, Soft Skills, Working Within a Group). This soft skills document is aligned with Core Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies, the Classroom Values and Standards guidelines (<http://kevinplummerphd.com/classroom-values-and-behavioral-standards/>), and The Student Profile (a rating of student social, emotional & Behavioral Functioning— <http://kevinplummerphd.com/student-profile-form-a-rating-of-student-social-emotional-behavioral-functioning/>).

There are many ways to address soft skills in a school setting. Soft skills (and the respective proficiency criteria) can be used to construct IEPs when social/emotional learning and social/emotional functioning is targeted for improvement. Soft skills can be used with Goal Cards as part of a micro goal program (<http://kevinplummerphd.com/micro-goal-programming/>). Soft skills can also be focus of very short-term goals. For example, during an academic subject or activity the teacher may want to emphasize the soft skills associated with working within a group. Those skills would be posted and reinforced, or used to evaluate groups during that academic activity, as well as other activities that call for the same set of skills. Soft skills can help define the class as a community (e.g., Civility in the Classroom) and they can be part of a set of community improvement goals, where the class as a whole is measured for progress. Alternatively, a teacher could decide to feature any skill for improvement (e.g., listening attentively, being polite, organization, etc.) and create a routine for the class to follow. This routine should be visually supported and displayed prominently, referred to often, reinforced when it is followed, and redirected when it isn’t followed. Once the class achieves proficiency with one set of skills, new soft skills routines can be created. Soft skills routines should be rehearsed prior to each use (at first), reinforced during their use, and evaluated after their use.

Social Emotional Learning

Examples of Soft Skills for School and Life

Class Participation and Work Habits

Listen attentively

Participate in class, try to contribute



Listen attentively
 Comment on the topic
 Show interest
 Show enthusiasm, try to make a connection
 Follow directions
 Work at a steady pace
 Comply with requests
 Be persistent, try again
 Tolerate making a mistake/getting it wrong
 Share teacher attention
 Work independently
 Wait your turn
 Tolerate disappointment
 Get started on work without prompting
 Respond agreeably when corrected by the teacher
 Tolerate not getting a turn
 Tolerate denial of a request
 Wait calmly for things to begin
 Wait calmly for the teacher to respond
 Use suggestions to improve your work
 Be Patient
 Take your time, work carefully
 Produce work that is neat
 Show pride in work produced
 Practice effective study habits
 Try your best when it is difficult
 Try your best when it is something you do not like to do
 Keep going until it's finished
 Keep going, keep trying, even though it's hard, or you're uncertain. Don't give up

Listen quietly
 Look at the teacher or your materials
 Keep your mind on what your teacher is saying
 Stay in your area
 orient your body to the source of information
 Think about what you want to ask
 Think about what you want to say
 Try to connect what you hear to what you already know

Civility in the Classroom

Respect the ideas of others
 Ask permission before you go ahead
 Show gratitude
 Respect privacy
 Be considerate of the needs of others
 Show others that you care about them
 Refrain from disturbing others
 Show interest in the ideas of others
 Refrain from teasing
 Be respectful toward all people
 Be polite, use good manners →
 Be friendly and welcoming
 Refrain from all bullying
 Offer to help others when needed
 Show appreciation for the efforts of others
 Refrain from derogatory name calling
 Contribute to a positive class culture
 Show sensitivity when using sarcasm
 Express remorse when appropriate
 Accept responsibility
 Acknowledge the care shown by the staff
 Take good care of school property
 Refrain from disrupting ongoing activities
 Take good care of your work environment
 Refrain from “telling on” others for small problems
 Make comments that are polite and friendly

Be Polite

Use a polite tone of voice
 Use polite words like please and thank you,
 no thank you
 Let others go first, hold the door
 Ask polite permission
 Make polite suggestions
 Object in a polite way
 Give personal space
 Share supplies
 Apologize when necessary

Problem Solving and Decision Making

Show good impulse control, stop and think before acting
 Respond constructively to normal levels of provocation
 Achieve a calm state before deciding what to do
 Stay calm and patient while problem solving
 See the problem from other perspectives
 Use reflective listening
 Control the impulse to “have the last word”
 Consider the feelings of the people involved
 Generate several possible solutions
 Consider the outcomes of various courses of action
 Evaluate the relative merits (pros and cons) of several solutions
 Convince the other person (people) that you understand their viewpoint
 Build a plan by combining the best solution alternatives
 Evaluate the effectiveness of your plan
 Accept responsibility for your decisions
 Try again following unsuccessful attempts

Organization and Concentration

Stay focused

Stay focused
 Stay engaged
 Ignore teasing and reckless remarks
 Try hard, make a strong effort
 Get to work without delay
 Work with care, do your best
 Keep your area neat
 Keep your materials and area organized
 Understand the directions before starting
 Gather what you will need to complete the work
 Arrange a suitable work environment
 Make a completion plan for longer assignments
 Ignore disturbances
 Stay out of and stay away from the other people’s problems

Keep your eyes on your work
 Keep your mind on your work
 Block out distractions
 Work at a steady pace
 Concentrate on what is important
 Stay with the task, don’t quit or wander away
 Ignore unrelated thoughts
 Let the teacher handle problems in the room
 Keep a calm and settled body

Self-Regulation

Stay settled in mind and body
 Keep learning, stay calm when you get it wrong
 Smile often, present a positive and upbeat mood
 Use breaks to restore and become productive →
 Accurately identify your emotional state
 Ask for help when you need it
 Ask for the space that you need
 Let people help, accept help when it is offered
 Maintain optimal arousal
 Remain calm when problems arise
 Inhibit unnecessary movement
 Walking feet in the classroom
 Ignore extraneous thoughts
 Quiet the noises and unnecessary remarks
 Inhibit extraneous sounds/vocalizations
 Inhibit impulsive responding (unnecessary comments and remarks)
 Work within your own space
 Keep your voice in your own space
 Keep your focus on your own activity
 Give others a chance to do their work
 Keep your activity in your own space
 Let others have their privacy and space
 Manage yourself when angry
 Manage your disappointment
 Tolerate frustration →
 Manage your stress
 Control your silliness

Use Breaks to Restore

Identify the signs that you need a break
 Identify what helps you restore
 Identify what it feels like to restore
 Identify the best time to take a break
 Independently use your break routine
 Complete your break efficiently
 Return to your work with a plan
 Return quietly to your work

Tolerate Frustration

Identify the look and sound of your frustration
 Identify situations that are frustrating
 Grade/rate frustration situations from mild to severe
 Develop several frustration coping tools
 Create frustration plans that match coping tools to the size of the frustration
 Rate task frustration level following task completion
 Compare pre-task and post-task ratings
 Measure and track frustration management progress

Working within a Group

Appropriately enter ongoing activity
 Give constructive feedback
 Respect the ideas of others
 Comment on the topic
 Show interest, show enthusiasm
 Follow directions
 Be considerate of the needs of others
 Show others that you care about them
 Offer suggestions without offending
 Avoid ordering people around
 Compliment others
 Accept feedback and suggestions
 Cooperate, compromise and do your part
 Encourage yourself and others
 Keep criticism to a minimum
 Be polite, use good manners
 Be friendly and welcoming
 Refrain from all bullying
 Be helpful when someone needs it
 Be kind, be giving, and be forgiving
 Show sensitivity for the feelings of others
 Give others credit when they do a good job
 Refrain from boasting and "showing off"
 Share materials and supplies
 Understand and appreciate the viewpoint of others
 Express your feelings clearly and politely
 Seek out an adult if needed
 Take good care of materials loaned to you
 Solve problems in a peaceful and fair manner
 Suggest solutions instead of protesting or complaining
 Stay focused, stay engaged
 Maintain a positive attitude when things don't go as planned

Cooperate

Take turns
 Listen to the other group members
 Divide the work fairly
 Share materials
 Accept input from others
 Respect the opinions of others
 Appreciate the perspective of others
 Show appreciation for the efforts of others
 State your opinion clearly
 Show patience
 Keep an open mind when compromising
 Find the middle ground on disagreements

Adaptability

Transition easily between activities
Delay meeting needs
Remain calm in the presence of mild to moderate provocation
Adjust easily to changes in routine
Settle quickly following an upset
Approach new experiences with an open mind
Take sufficient time to warm up to new experiences
Determine what is familiar about new experiences
Determine what is different about new experiences
Adjust to new experiences without unusual delay
Mood is stable and well matched to the situation
Able to maintain a focus on the present
Focus is more on problem solving than on complaining
Able to move on from a worry or a perseverative thought
Able to resolve an irritable mood
Perceived unfairness is not an obstacle
Remain calm when corrected in front of others
Stay calm when you get it wrong
Try to stay positive and keep learning when you get it wrong
Accept feedback and try to improve
Maintain a positive attitude when things don't work out as planned
Accept work assignments without experiencing distress
Try to be agreeable with staff requests
Use agreeable language following a staff direction or announcement

Communication in the Classroom

Secure and maintain joint or shared attention
 Look at the speaker when listening (or use gaze checks)
 Attend to the listener when speaking (or use gaze checks)
 Monitor the interest level and understanding of the listener
 Modify output based upon listener's verbal and nonverbal cues
 Provide nonverbal cues to help sustain communication
 Use gestures to support language
 Match affect to the message
 Maintain proper physical orientation to the listener or speaker
 Speech is fluent and intelligible
 Use appropriate volume
 Provide the listener with relevant context
 Provide information in proper sequence or temporal order
 Initiate and maintain effective conversation →
 Provide information clearly connected to a main point or idea
 Incorporate input from the listener
 Take the listener's perspective
 Request clarification when needed
 Provide appropriate amount of detail/information
 Allow for turn taking in discussion
 Recognize communication breakdown
 Repair communication breakdown
 Politely acknowledge when staff tell you something
 Respond in a polite way to staff requests
 Respond in a timely manner to staff

Effective Conversation

Identify and track the topic of Conversation
 Convey interest appropriately
 Add relevant comments and information
 Respond appropriately to comments
 Signal topic change and make a fluid shift
 Introduce related topics
 Monitor the interest level and understanding of the listener
 Provide relevant topic extensions
 Signal disinterest in acceptable fashion
 Appropriately signal end of conversation

Distress Tolerance

Continue to persist when feeling stressed
 Try your best when it is something you do not like to do
 Tolerate making a mistake/getting it wrong
 Try again when not successful
 Tolerate the demands of the task when feeling frustrated
 Keep working when the task is very difficult or it isn't going well
 Apply significant effort, even while struggling
 Wait your turn for an extended period
 Tolerate disappointment
 Maintain a focus on the possibility of success, despite task difficulty
 Avoid prematurely asking for help
 Stay calm and patient while problem solving
 Respond agreeably when corrected by the teacher
 Tolerate not getting a turn
 Tolerate denial of a request
 Stay settled in mind and body while struggling
 Keep learning, stay calm when you get it wrong
 Tolerate frustration, avoid acting out the feeling of frustration
 Manage yourself when angry
 Manage your disappointment
 Accurately perceive task difficulty, the size of the obstacle
 Accurately estimate the effort required
 Provide self-encouragement
 Maintain positive thoughts while facing challenges
 Suggest solutions instead of protesting or complaining
 Able to delay meeting personal needs
 Approach new experiences with an open mind
 Able to move on from a worry or a perseverative thought
 Accept feedback and try to improve
 Maintain a positive attitude when things don't work out as planned
 Refrain from protesting, blaming and accusing others when stressed
 Tolerate waiting, sitting still, extended listening, background noise, extensive directions
 Keep going, keep trying, even though it's hard, or you're uncertain. Don't give up