Promoting Social and Emotional Learning During School Closures: Why and How

With schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic for students in most parts of the world, instruction shifted to virtual teaching and learning. For students with greater access to digital resources, this instruction can include the use of digital devices—such as computers, tablets, and smartphones—to connect with teachers and other students either synchronously or asynchronously using video-enhanced content. Where students and their families do not have such devices, mass media platforms such as radio and television are being used to transmit both static and interactive lessons for students, as well as guidance tips for parents on how to support student learning while at home.

As important and effective as these approaches can be in fostering ongoing learning during this period of global crisis, we cannot lose sight of another important facet of student’s lives and ability to learn: their safety and sense of stability (United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative [UNGEI] & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). The international development community has begun to recognize the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) and positive and safe school and classroom climate in promoting academic achievement in schools. Further, donors, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have invested millions of dollars exploring ways to bolster social and emotional skills among students and teachers alike, including ways to raise awareness among teachers about the importance of safe and positive environments. Unfortunately, removing students from the classroom does not necessarily remove them from risks of violence (United Nations, 2020; World Health Organization, 2019). Just as the effects of this global pandemic are felt by adults, they also impact children whose routines and structures have largely disappeared (Stafford et al., 2009). As the world grapples with how best to promote ongoing learning among children at home, it must also continue to capitalize on improvements made in SEL development and child safety and security. Indeed, the current pandemic offers unexpected and unprecedented opportunities to ensure that progress achieved in SEL development and student safety is retained. For the education practitioner community, this means we must find and act in innovative ways to equip students and their parents and teachers with the social and emotional competencies they need to productively handle the stressors and potential risks in their lives.
How to effectively promote SEL development among children and their parents while simultaneously highlighting and trying to promote nurturing and enriching learning environments in homes is a daunting question. Under the leadership of USAID, however, projects are rising to the challenge in innovative ways. USAID’s Read Liberia education activity in Liberia is tackling this challenge by working directly with children in their homes and providing technical support to the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the development and recording of radio scripts as part of the MOE’s Education in Emergency Plan. Read Liberia’s early grade reading model, teaching and learning materials, and daily lessons are being adapted for national radio broadcasts, which are dramatically increasing the reach of the Activity’s core programming. Core to Read Liberia’s approach is helping teachers inherently address the social and emotional needs students bring to the classroom to remove barriers and facilitate learning. Even common strategies, such as making safe spaces for students to respond to questions without fear of punishment and ensuring that all students are supported in participating—strategies teachers are trained in—help students to feel nurtured and enable learning. Read Liberia continues to weave this type of social and emotional support in its radio-based lessons, helping students notice, understand, and respond to their emotions and feelings.

This approach, adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s (CASEL’s) competency model (CASEL, 2020), integrates in language arts lessons specific skills children can work on independently or in collaboration with their parents (Figure 1). For example, children are encouraged to explore their own feelings of empathy through guided questions around a story or a picture. Because a story or picture can depict a character as feeling frightened, uncertain, or sad, children are prompted to explore those feelings through questions, such as, “How do you think this character is feeling?”, “Why do you think she may feel that way?”, and “What would you do to make her feel better?” Children are then prompted to self-reflect and identify what in their lives makes them feel frightened or sad and to explore options for handling those feelings. This strategy is also an effective way to engage children in the story or lesson, as such questions help to make the story or lesson directly relevant to them. Concurrently, parents are engaged to think about how to model effective strategies for handling emotions and for showing children that they are being heard and not judged.

Figure 1. CASEL’s SEL Competency Areas and Skillsets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency Area</th>
<th>Skillsets Taught</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>Identifying Emotions, Identifying Strengths and Areas for Growth, Believing that Your Abilities can Improve Over Time (Growth Mindset)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Management</td>
<td>Managing Emotions, Controlling impulses, Setting Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td>Showing Empathy, Appreciating Diversity, Having Respect for Others, Understanding Different Perspectives and Points of View</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Skills</td>
<td>Communicating, Cooperating with Others, Relationship-Building, Conflict Resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Decision-Making</td>
<td>Identifying and Solving problems, Reflecting, Evaluating</td>
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In Tanzania, the USAID Tusome Pamoja Project is innovating in SEL and safe school strategies by engaging teachers during school closures to continue building their SEL skills while they are at home. Prior to COVID-19 closures, the project was in the process of conducting a program—“Enabling a Safe School Environment through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)”—to create safe learning environments and promote SEL in schools. Tusome Pamoja completed a workshop whereby teachers from Iringa Region worked together with Tusome Pamoja staff to co-create safe school and SEL activities that garnered
significant local support and momentum. To continue generating ideas and maintain teachers’ enthusiasm, the team developed a remote support plan to promote this collaboration virtually during the pandemic. The plan uses localized WhatsApp groups with the same teachers (managed by Tusome Pamoja staff) to offer a series of weekly prompts around a theme that mirrors the content teachers discussed during the workshop. In this system, daily prompts follow a set routine (see bullets below), with content changing weekly (see Figure 2 for a sample week routine). Additionally, the Tusome Pamoja technical team can collect data/responses from the teachers remotely and provide feedback.

The daily prompt schedule is as follows:

- **Day 1**—Prior week feedback: Teachers receive feedback from Tusome Pamoja staff about the previous week’s activities.
- **Day 2**—Pause and reflect: Teachers pause and reflect about the theme by either thinking to themselves or writing in a journal.
- **Day 3**—15-minute challenge: Based on the previous day’s reflection, teachers work independently on an activity to operationalize their thinking and spark creativity. This activity could include designing or revising a lesson plan that takes the week’s theme into consideration or developing a new method of teaching content to students (e.g., via a game, group or pair work).
- **Day 4**—Virtual group work: Tusome Pamoja staff facilitate virtual WhatsApp breakout groups for teachers to discuss their thinking and the activity they worked on over the previous 2 days.
- **Day 5**—Plenary WhatsApp group: All teachers convene in the larger WhatsApp group for a virtual “plenary” discussion on the week’s reflection, activity, and breakout group discussions. On Day 5, Tusome Pamoja staff send out an SMS message via the WhatsApp chat with a summary of the week’s theme and learnings.

Ward Education Officers (WEOs) assist the Tusome Pamoja team in disseminating content to teachers and managing the WhatsApp group(s). WEOs also collect feedback from teachers daily and provide remote assistance and support when needed. WEOs then send teacher feedback to the Tusome Pamoja team, who analyzes it and provides their own feedback in the form of content-related coaching and support to teachers. Examples of feedback include providing suggestions for teachers to better facilitate group and pair work and reviewing teachers’ draft lesson plans or activities. A positive externality of this remote program support has been the virtual community created. Establishing a sense of community, even virtually, is critical to maintaining teachers’ motivation and momentum. Notably, Tusome Pamoja’s Enabling a Safe School Environment through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) activity has witnessed 100% teacher participation.

**Figure 2. Sample Weekly SEL Routine**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pair Work</strong></td>
<td>Feedback Day (Teachers receive feedback on their &quot;15-minute challenge&quot; from the previous week. The new theme is introduced.)</td>
<td>Pause and Reflect (Guiding questions: What small task could children do in a pair? How might working in pairs help children learn better?)</td>
<td>15-minute Challenge (Task: redesign a lesson so that it includes pair work. Note solutions to possible barriers.)</td>
<td>Virtual Group Work (Task: in a WhatsApp group of 3 to 4 teachers, discuss the redesigned lesson plans and anticipated challenges.)</td>
<td>Summary SMS Message (Message: What skills do student need to do well in pair work? Why is pair work important for learning?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Discipline</td>
<td>Teachers receive feedback on their &quot;15-minute challenge&quot; from the previous week. The new theme is introduced.</td>
<td>Guided Reflection: think back to your early primary days. You raise your hand in class to ask a question. How does the teacher respond? You miss an answer on a test. What does the teacher say? You act out in class. What does the teacher do to correct your behavior? How did this make you feel?</td>
<td>Record two scenarios. Teachers listen to each scenario and then respond via the platform/WhatsApp noting which one was positive discipline. Ask teachers why they think this is positive discipline (it can be multiple choice) and they can respond via the platform.</td>
<td>Take one of the scenarios from this week and discuss how you would handle the scenario. What would corporal punishment look like? What would positive discipline look like? How do you think the child would feel for both the positive discipline response and the response using corporal punishment?</td>
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Finally, the USAID-funded project ABC+: Advancing Basic Education in the Philippines is developing a social- and mass-media communication plan to enable parents, teachers, and other adults in families and communities to best support children during COVID-19-related school disruptions. This series of media-based posts will showcase USAID’s emerging response to support learning continuity during the pandemic, injecting key project messages on literacy, numeracy, and SEL that are aligned with USAID’s education goals and programming. Shared messages will include the following:

- SEL-focused tips to help parents to talk to their children about COVID-19
- Advice to help parents and children cope with the pandemic through simple, everyday actions to avoid contracting and spreading COVID-19
- Simple, actionable opportunities to incorporate play-based literacy and learning into children’s everyday routines
- A curated list of free online reading materials and activities for parents and children to use
- Ways teachers can engage in their own at-home learning and distance education.

The messages will also capture dispatches from the field, which provide insights into how Philippine schools, teachers, and students are coping with COVID-19; messages on resilience; and instances of partnership between the United States and Philippine governments (see Figure 3 for the objective and content of a sample message).

**Figure 3. ABC+ Sample Message Objective and Content**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Key Messages</th>
<th>Content and Format</th>
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| Disseminate simple but actionable messages to parents, teachers, and other trusted adults for incorporating play-based learning opportunities into children’s everyday routines, no matter where they are located | • Being at home all day can be boring for everyone, especially children. Parents, teachers, and other trusted adults can make use of this free time to bond with their children and encourage play-based learning at home or wherever they may be.  
• Learning can be fun and meaningful. By incorporating play in children’s learning activities, they are given opportunities to create, explore, and make sense of the world around them.  
• There are ways to make learning to read and reading to learn fun for children.  
• There are simple actions that parents, teachers, and other trusted adults can do to enrich children’s literacy experiences. | • Tip Sheet #2: 6 Tips for Keeping Your Child Meaningfully Engaged at Home  
These tips may be presented as a series of textual posts or rendered as individual pictograms. This could be part of a “parenting tip” series, which can be posted daily. It can also be published as a Facebook post. |

SEL is not and should not be limited to a set of child-centered activities. Teachers, parents, and the school and classroom climate have roles to play in fostering a child’s social and emotional development. Now is the time to ensure that students and the adults in their lives have the tools needed to navigate the uncertainty and disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to their lives. It is also an opportune time to continue to build teachers’ ability to address students’ SEL and safety needs once they return to schools. The cross-fertilization of ideas from virtual programming across projects and countries feeds innovation and helps to ensure that teachers, parents, and students not only build the SEL competencies they need to navigate this current crisis but can successfully transition back to their schools and workplaces when the time comes.

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