

Soft Skills are Success Skills

Promoting social emotional learning among Kansas youth

Why Are Soft Skills Important?

It has become common for teachers, camp counselors, parents, and other caring adults to express concern about school-age children who can't seem to regulate their emotions, appreciate the feelings of others, or control behaviors linked to strong emotion. Employers also express concern when they discover that some adult employees cannot control emotional outbursts or work in teams because of their lack of social emotional skills. An international survey of 380 employers found that for young people (ages 15 to 29) to enter and succeed in the modernized workforce they need "soft skills" and personal qualities that help them navigate their environment, work with others, perform well, and achieve their goals (Lippman, L.H., Ryberg, R., Carney, R., and Moore, K.A., 2015) Eight of the top 10 skills employers are seeking in the 21st century work force are social skills and character qualities (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2011). In 2015, results from numerous focus groups across Kansas by the Kansas Department of Education revealed that citizens as well as business leaders said students need more than just academics to succeed after high school. The evidence is building: academic achievement is not enough for children and youth to develop into contributing adults. It is necessary they develop social emotional skills that can be carried into adulthood.

What Are Soft Skills?

Social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept are important to success in school, work, and personal relationships (Lippman, L.H., Ryberg, R., Carney, R., and Moore, K.A., 2015). A national leader in social emotional learning is the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which focuses on five social emotional skills essential to positive youth development:

- **Self-awareness:** ability to recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior.
- **Self-Management:** ability to regulate one's emotions and behaviors effectively in different situations. Includes stress management and controlling impulses.
- **Social Awareness:** ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others.
- **Relationship Skills:** ability to establish and maintain healthy, rewarding relationships with individuals and groups (for example, listening and cooperation).
- **Responsible Decision-making:** ability to make constructive, respectful choices about interactions.

Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies



These social emotional skills are essential to "understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." (www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning, 2015).

Educators, decision-makers, and adult volunteers have discovered problem behaviors (for example, dropping out, bullying, and drug use) can be prevented or reduced when young people are engaged in activities in and out of school that teach social emotional skills. The impact of social emotional learning is amplified when parents and community-based youth programs (such as after-school clubs, youth groups, sports teams, and camps) are intentional in their teaching, practice, and reinforcement of social emotional skills.

How to Promote Social Emotional Learning?

Children of any age want to feel competent, confident, and connected to others. But when they feel frustrated or confused by difficult emotions they may inappropriately act-out, creating tension among others and disruption in groups. Adults who are leading groups of young people need to understand emotions and how social emotional skills are learned. Then, adults can help children regulate their own emotions before emotions lead to disruptions and problems.

First, adults need to know the social emotional learning process. Yale University has given permission to use their RULER acronym as a social emotional learning technique when teaching adults.

Specifically, RULER (Copyright © 2015 [Yale University]) stands for:

R	ecognizing emotions in self & others
U	nderstanding the causes & consequences of emotions
L	abeling emotions accurately
E	xpressing emotions appropriately
R	egulating emotions effectively

Next, adults need to intentionally integrate social emotional learning opportunities into their interactions with children and reinforce positive social emotional skills throughout their time together. Using the RULER acronym, the activity below will help adults learn how social emotional skills are developed. The remaining activities can be introduced with small or large groups of children.

1) RULER Skills Application Activity

(What's Bugging You?)

Session for Adults and Older Youth

This activity takes about 20 minutes to complete.

The RULER skills remind individuals of the five interrelated emotional literacy skills. The bug graphic on page 6 will help the learner break down, visualize, and reflect upon each skill, building social emotional competence.

As a leader, walk the learners through the RULER skills. Provide additional supplies (colored writing utensils) to help learners expand their ability to depict their emotional experience on paper. Some individuals may choose to define their experience with words and others may feel more comfortable using pictures. Regardless how the experience is represented, it is important for each individual to think critically about the process of social and emotional learning. Before the activity, the leader may find it helpful to brainstorm a personal example of an emotional experience to share with the audience throughout the activity.

Recognizing Emotion (Antenna of Bug)

Recall a time you experienced something that “bugged you.” Recognize that you were/are experiencing an emotion. Use your senses (sound, sight, touch, smell and taste) to examine the experience through your thoughts, body, and actions. Examine the environment around you during the experience. Write down your perception about the emotional experience on the bug’s antennas.

Example: My current emotional experience is exhaustion. Everything I have had to eat or drink today has tasted bland. My sense of touch feels heavier than usual, and the sounds and sights around me are initially blurred. It takes extra time for conversations, thoughts and actions to come into focus for me today.

Understanding Emotion

Every emotion has a cause, a trigger, based on one’s interaction with his or her environment. Emotions also have a consequence, which is the influence the emotion has on thoughts, decisions, and behavior. Refer to your own emotional experience. Take note of what the emotion’s cause and consequences are:

- **Trigger (Head of Bug)** — Example: In the last three weeks, I have been managing more than my usual personal and professional responsibilities. Long hours away from home have altered my schedule of self-care, resulting in a less nutritious diet and limited sleep.
- **Consequence (Eyes of Bug)** — Example: While I am passionate about the responsibilities I am engaged in, my body is low on energy. Neglecting self-care is decreasing my effectiveness as I fulfill the roles of my personal and professional life.

Label Emotion (Spots on Bug)

At a young age, people start to label emotions as feelings. Emotions are often closely linked, yet when you begin to differentiate between them variations in your thoughts, decisions, and behaviors can be recognized. A mature feelings vocabulary allows individuals to communicate more effectively and increase positive social interactions. Think of your emotional experience. On the bug's spots write down feelings that can be used to label the emotion accurately. Pleasant Feelings — festive, cheerful, thrilled, surprised, quiet, sympathetic. Unpleasant Feelings — irritated, powerless, pessimistic, vulnerable, fatigued.

Expressing Emotion (Wings of Bug)

Expressing emotion is based on one's prior experiences, learning, culture, and context. What social rules and communication strategies have you learned from your gender, family, culture, community, other influences? Individuals who are aware of and understand the social norms for their emotional expression are better able to regulate their behaviors accordingly. Emotional expression is often referred to as manners. List a few behaviors that would express the emotion you identified earlier. How did you learn it was acceptable (or not) to behave this way? Examples: running late, missed assignments, lack of concentration, short temper, weak level of strength, asking for a "time out," limited patience.

Regulating Emotion (Legs of Bug)

This refers to strategies used to manage the consequences of an emotion (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors). Most of these strategies are learned across the lifespan. Learning ways to regulate emotions implies the ability to prevent, reduce, initiate, maintain, or enhance the impact of an emotion.

Think about your emotional experience and how you've chosen to express it. Identify the strategies you used (or could have used) to manage the emotion in an acceptable fashion and with positive results for you and those around you. Are there any strategies you should not choose because of the risk of having a negative impact? Example: set priorities, practice time management, permission to say "no," take a self-care day.



2) Building Social Emotional Literacy

Creating an environment of social emotional health begins before individuals are experiencing emotions that increase stress, tension, and poor decision-

making. The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) has compiled easy-to-use resources providing hands-on ways to incorporate social emotional skill building activities into the everyday routines of children. While the resources are specifically designed for use with audiences under the age of 5, many activities can be used to promote social emotional learning across the age spectrum. Visit csefel.vanderbilt.edu.



3) Calming Techniques

When children are showing signs of stress or an inability to regulate their emotions, calming techniques can become powerful tools. The techniques are used to help children slow down and process their experience so they can make choices about expressing and regulating emotions that will not harm him-or-herself, others, or the environment they are engaged in. A calming technique is most effective when children learn, practice, and discuss it before encountering an experience where the technique needs to be applied. Conscious Discipline provides many helpful resources related to calming techniques and social emotional learning in school-age children at consciousdiscipline.com.

Pretzel

To help children learn to calm down through controlled breathing, teach them the "pretzel." This can be done while standing or sitting. Instruct children to cross their feet on the floor and cross their arms down in front of them. Then, clasp their hands together and bring them up under their chin. This crossing of feet and arms stimulates both sides of the brain. The last step is for the child to put the tongue on the roof of the mouth, also signaling to the brain to relax.

Popsicle

One way to teach children to relax is by doing the “popsicle” — stand very stiff with their hands by their sides and tighten all of their muscles as if they are a frozen popsicle. Then, have the children relax by “melting” to the floor, loosening all of their muscles. Be sure children do not fall during this and similar activities.

S.T.A.R. Breathing

S.T.A.R. stands for Stop, Take a deep breath, And Relax. Children can internally think about the acronym, or they can sing the complementary song and do actions that mimic being a star. This activity helps children ask for a “time out” to calm down and process an emotional experience in a positive way.

4) Positive Thinking, Connection to Others and Appreciation Skills

A negative emotional experience can create high stress, tension, and poor decision-making. These impacts affect the individual and those in the vicinity. As humans, it is natural to react to these types of experiences by fight, flight, or freezing. Sometimes using a calming technique is not enough to regulate one’s emotion and manage thoughts and behaviors. Caring adults can assist children and youth through activities that promote learning non-violent strategies to process challenging experiences.

Stop — Breathe — Think

Decide on a location where the child can go for a long walk at a relatively slow pace. Instruct the child to begin walking either alone or with others. Walk for approximately 3 minutes. Stop walking after 3 minutes. Stand in one spot, take a long deep breath, and think about positive things in your life. (for example, your first pet, a time when you were successful, your favorite song or movie, someone you consider a hero, etc.). Now continue to walk for another 3 minutes. Stop walking. Take a deep breath and think about another positive thing in life. Continue this for up to 15 minutes. (from: Garner, A., Roberson, J., Schlagel, S., Smith, J., & Smith, T, (2015). ‘How to improve my self-regulation skills’ tool. KVC Hospitals Inc.)

Let’s Take a Trip

Find a comfortable position to sit or lie. Ask the child to imagine taking a trip to anywhere in the world. Imagine they could use any kind of transportation to arrive at their destination. Ask them to think about these questions: Who are the important people that would travel with you? What

are the most important things you would take with you? Where would you go? What would you do? Be creative and only imagine positive people, items, and activities. Continue this activity for about 3–5 minutes. If children are with a group they can share about their trip with others. (from: Garner, A., Roberson, J., Schlagel, S., Smith, J., & Smith, T, (2015). ‘How to improve my self-regulation skills’ tool. KVC Hospitals Inc.)

5) Planning for Emotional Safety for Children Age 10+: Let’s Make a Safety Plan

One component of an individual’s social emotional skillset is making a safety plan. Caring adults can help a child or youth identify people, places, and activities to assist with managing emotional and behavioral responses. The following is a scenario describing a typical relationship situation that prepares the child to think about designing an emotional/relationship safety plan. With this plan, a child takes control of their emotions so that friendships aren’t harmed.

Case Study

Sam and Allie are about the same age and they live in the same community. They are friends and are in many school and non-school activities together. Sam has a hard time dealing with arguments with her friend, Allie. When Sam and Allie get into a fight she feels extremely sad, heartbroken, and afraid that Allie will not be her friend anymore. For a long time Sam blamed herself for these fights. She learned over time that friends argue and disagree sometimes and that each fight isn’t the end of the world. Sam said being around her parents, her babysitter Molly, or her sibling Jake makes her feel better. It’s best for Sam to do things such as make a craft, help prepare supper, or relax in the living room with a book or puzzle to keep her distracted from negative thoughts overwhelming her. Sam also stated taking deep breaths when becoming overwhelmed helps her remain calm. Taking a walk or talking with others helps as well. If Sam and Allie get in a fight, it would be a safe plan for Sam to ask Molly to go for a bike ride and talk about anything but Allie!



Sam's "Safety" Plan: Something is Bugging Me

When do I get stressed?

Stressful Events/Situations: Emotional/Behavioral Responses:

When I get in an argument with my friend I feel sad, heartbroken and afraid. I may cry, shut down and avoid others

My Safe Resources

Safe People: Mom, Dad, babysitter Molly, sibling Jake
My Safe Places: Bike ride with Molly, be with family at home.

Safe Activities: Deep breathing, make a craft, or talking to someone

Exercise: Now develop your own safety plan. Identify stressful events or situations that may cause you to feel overwhelmed. Be honest about your emotional and behavioral responses when these events occur. Identify as many safe people, places, and activities as you can. If you can't identify any, get with a friend or trusted adult to help you. Once you have your plan completed, you can choose to share it with the group or keep it private. Keep it with you in your wallet, purse, or cellphone. Update your plan regularly if situations change in your life or you identify new safe people, places, and activities.

My "Safety" Plan: Something is Bugging Me

When do I get stressed?

Stressful Events/Situations: Emotional/Behavioral Responses:

My Safe Resources

My Safe People: **My Safe Places:**

My Safe Activities:

Support from Others

Social emotional learning can be supported by anyone in the community who understands that soft skills are learned and mastered over time and through practice. Though parents are the first teachers of social emotional skills for their

children, schools, youth programs, other family members, and community leaders also have a responsibility to teach the soft skills by example. Anyone can:

- Focus on a child's social strengths.
- Ask a child how they feel and then listen to their response without interruption.
- Find ways to stay calm when angry. Share and model what adults do when they control themselves well.
- Avoid humiliating and mocking a child.
- Demonstrate being positive, communicating respect, and appreciation.
- Create school and/or community-wide parenting workshops or group meetings for social emotional learning. (*CASEL.org*)

Sources

Collaboration for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning (www.casel.org)

Garner, A., Roberson, J., Schlagel, S., Smith, J., & Smith, T. (2015). 'How to improve my self-regulation skills' tool. KVC Hospitals Inc.

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Watson, R., (August 21, 2015) Commissioner's Report from the Kansas Department of Education's annual town-hall meetings.

What Bugs Me...

ANTENNAS: Recognize you are experiencing an emotion through your 5 senses.

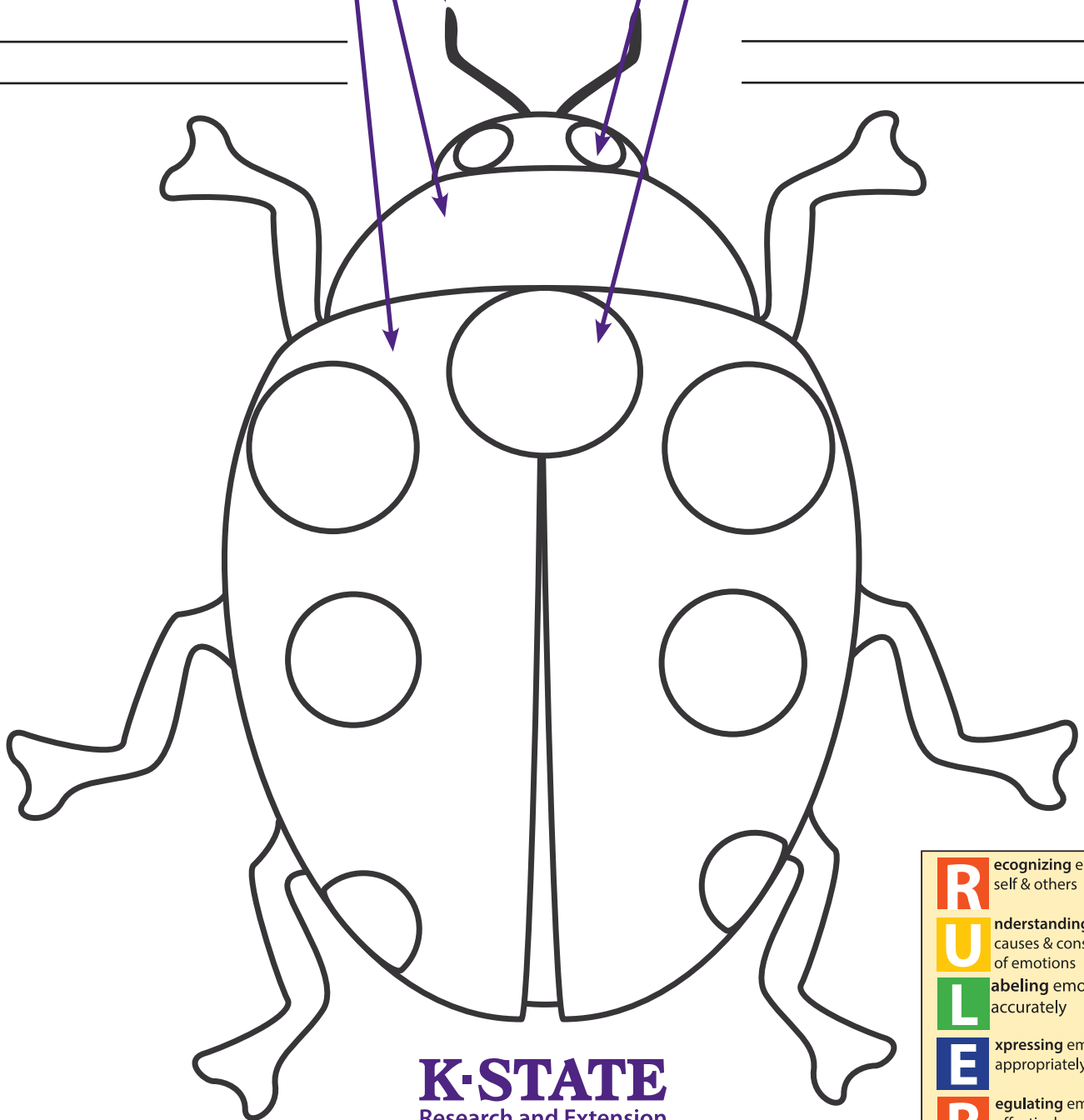
HEAD: What causes or triggers the emotion?

WINGS: Recognize how you express the emotion through social rules and communication strategies you have learned.

EYES: What are the emotion's consequences (influences on thoughts, decisions, and behavior)?

SPOTS: Label the emotion with feeling words.

LEGS: Identify strategies you will use to manage or regulate the impact of the emotion.



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Evaluation

For each question, put an “X” in the response that most closely represents your opinion. Your opinions will help us develop other materials associated with *Soft Skills Are Success Skills*.

This lesson has . . .	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
helped me understand the social emotional learning process (ie., RULER).					
made me more aware of children's responses in situations of high stress or difficult emotions.					
prepared me to be more supportive of children in situations of high stress or difficult emotions.					
motivated me to learn more about how to help children in situations of high stress or difficult emotions.					
equipped me to help children in situations of high stress or difficult emotions through development of their social emotional skills.					

What did you like most about this lesson?

What would you change or improve about this lesson?

Do you have any additional comments?

Please tell us about yourself.

Gender	Age	Racial Identity	Ethnic Identity
<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male	___ Age in years	<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/Alaskan Native <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed race (more than 1 race) <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Latino/Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Not Latino/Hispanic

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