

# Raising Caring Kids: Using Email to Engage Families in Social Emotional Learning

Envision the skills that allow people to calm down, make friends, positively participate in community, and make fair, safe choices. Called social and emotional learning (SEL), these skills represent the way people recognize and manage personal responses that impact interpersonal interactions and long-term individual success. Recognizing the need for resources teaching SEL skills to families, two Wisconsin state institutions partnered to create a free e-resource for families called Raising Caring Kids. Post-program statewide results show increased parental knowledge about SEL concepts, greater confidence in teaching SEL skills to children, and the intention to try new behaviors related to SEL.



## RESEARCH

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Raising Caring Kids – Snippets of Animated Video “Responsibility”  
Parent gives child tools for handling tough situations when parent isn't nearby.



Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills help children calm down when upset, make (and keep) friends, positively participate in community, and make fair and safe choices. These skills are key to establishing and maintaining relationships as well as managing emotions over a lifetime, support lifelong learning, and creating positive self-identity (Payton et al., 2000). Research points to the crucial role SEL skills play in ensuring school success, decreasing conduct problems, and developing a more positive sense of self (Bierman et al., 2008; Howse et al., 2003; McClelland et al., 2007). While much focus has been given to the value of teaching SEL in school settings (Taylor et al., 2007), family is where children first learn emotional skills (Fredericks et al., 2016). When adults model positive emotional skills, children become competent in those same

skills (Bierman, Morris, & Abenavoli, 2017). SEL knowledge and practice increase children's abilities to make positive behavior choices now and, in the future (Hawkins et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2015). The value of supporting parents as SEL role models is clear and a wide variety of methods from in person classes to school family partnerships have been used to teach parents' SEL skills (Fredericks et al., 2016).

Research also shows that parenting education and support can be successfully offered through digital, asynchronous resources. For instance, online resources and e-newsletters have been linked to increased parental knowledge and behavior changes (Clarkson & Zierl, 2019; Vilches et al., 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19

global pandemic illustrated the need for effective, digital resources to support families and parents. However, few resources have explored SEL resources for parents in an asynchronous online format. The teaching of SEL skills using digital resources represents a unique opportunity for positive family engagement.

## OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study was to measure the efficacy of a no-cost, digitally delivered social-emotional learning (SEL) resource for parents and caregivers of elementary-age children (K-5). The three main objectives were to:

- increase parents' knowledge about social-emotional development,
- increase parents' confidence in teaching SEL skills to their children, and
- change parental behavior as a result of trying new SEL skills.

## METHOD

### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

A team from UW–Madison Extension developed a digital SEL program for parents called Raising Caring Kids (RCK). RCK equips parents and caregivers of elementary-age children (K-5) with tools and resources to develop and foster SEL skills while nurturing positive parent-child relationships. These materials were based on WI Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) SEL competencies list, which draws upon the national Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning competencies (CASEL 2021).

The RCK Program uses a multi-pronged approach for reaching

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parents with diverse learning styles and abilities and is available in English and Spanish. Sixteen articles (see Figure 1) written in plain “everyday” language form the core content of RCK (Berg et al., 2021). RCK was designed for schools to send one article per week for sixteen weeks via the school’s email system. Each article links to one of the following SEL competencies: personal emotions, empathy, positive self-identity, lifelong learner, respect others, social skills, responsible choices, and civic responsibility. Each article follows the format of 1) introducing a parenting challenge and article objectives, 2) sharing basic research on the article objective, 3) suggesting a related skill that parents can practice with their children, and 4) an additional resource, tip, or skill for families to try. Five short videos were also developed to further explain SEL concepts and were embedded in five of the articles. These videos ranged from one to four-minutes long illustrating the skills of problem solving, mindfulness, persistence, perspective taking, and responsibility.

## RECRUITMENT

RCK was promoted through a variety of channels throughout Wisconsin including flyers, social media posts, listservs, conference presentation, and word of mouth by colleagues at both UW-Madison-Extension and WI DPI. RCK establishes a way for schools and other community partners to authentically partner with families to promote SEL skills at home. School administrators, counselors or other professionals could sign up to receive instructions for delivering the email series to parents of elementary-age children. From October 2018 to October 2019, 511 school administrators, teachers, and other professionals registered to receive information on how to deliver RCK.

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

Data about RCK was collected through 1) a parent self-report questionnaire, and 2) phone interviews with school personnel connected to the project. This research project did not meet the federal definition of human subjects’ research according to UW Madison senior IRB analyst. Short link URLs included in each email to parents were also used to collect click-through rates and show that an average of 459 individuals clicked on the emailed link each week to access the full content. Parents clicked a survey link embedded in the final four RCK emails to provide feedback on a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire included items about SEL tips parents learned, parents’ perceived confidence in teaching SEL before and after RCK and plans for applying SEL skills. Ninety-one (19.8%) of parents responded to the survey, based on the average

number of parents accessing each article via the short URL and the total parents who completed the online questionnaire. Additionally, 15 elementary school staff from one participating school gave feedback during short phone interviews on RCK and any changes they noticed in SEL in their classroom after distributing RCK. Staff interviews and open-ended parent questions were analyzed and coded using the social emotional competencies framework.

# RESULTS

## NEW KNOWLEDGE OF SEL SKILLS

RCK participants reported new knowledge related to SEL skills. More than a third of participants (n=37) mentioned at least one tip/idea that they learned from RCK. The tips and ideas that parents described learning mapped onto the eight SEL competencies at the core of RCK (see Table 1). For instance, one parent shared they learned “how to ask how the child feels instead of telling them what to feel,” which links to several SEL competencies such as personal emotions, empathy, respect others, and social skills. Another parent shared about teaching respect for others, social skills, and empathy while watching a show by “Pointing out faces or expressions on characters in a movie, pausing the movie and having a quick conversation about how or what they might be feeling or what we think they should.” Another parent described a growth mindset and the competency of lifelong learning in the take-away of “asking my child how to solve a problem instead of telling her.” Many parents reported learning (or remembering) the value of patience and calm in communicating with their children. Although RCK includes two articles for each core competency, the skills most mentioned related to emotional knowledge and interpersonal skills. Several core competencies were mentioned simultaneously by participants. Social skills were mentioned most frequently with both personal emotions and empathy. Respect others was mentioned along with empathy and social skills.

Most teachers shared that social-emotional learning was an important topic and RCK content met a definite need for families. One teacher agreed that the program was a valuable source of knowledge for parents “... because it’s just one more little piece of the social and emotional education that we don’t really have in our building or district. Even the little blurbs in the email gave parents an idea of what they could try.”

## INCREASED PARENTAL CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING SEL SKILLS

Parents were asked to report their confidence in teaching social and emotional skills to their children before and after participation in the program. Results showed they felt significantly more confident in teaching SEL skills after receiving RCK. Specifically, the proportion of those with a high confidence level more than doubled from 25.0% to 54.7% (Figure 2). One parent specifically highlighted the five videos created for RCK as a useful tool for teaching social-emotional skills to their children, saying, "The video resources worked well as conversation starters."

## CHANGING BEHAVIOR BY TRYING NEW IDEAS

Respondents were asked to share a tip they learned from RCK that they intended to practice with their children illustrating the types of behavior changes that might be observed. Seventy percent (n= 63) of the parents reported having tried a new parenting idea from RCK and among these parents, 85% (n=54) shared they had tried one to four ideas, and 15% (n=9) tried five or more new ideas. One respondent recalled a specific activity from RCK: "make a game of using face to describe emotion, naming emotions." A parent also illustrated the value of modeling skills for their children: "We make sure we pay more attention to the behavior we model for our kids and make sure we take more time for learning opportunities."

Tips that respondents said they would integrate into their daily parenting life addressed all eight core SEL competencies taught in the RCK articles. Parents were most likely to mention adding the competency of social skills (n=16) to their parent-child interactions, followed by personal emotions (n=9). Some parents shared examples that integrated multiple SEL competencies. For instance, one respondent said, "We read books showing how the characters reached goals and speak to our kids about solutions to reach their goals," representing both lifelong learner and positive self-identity competencies.

About a quarter of respondents (n=22) reported being highly confident in SEL prior to the program. These parents still reported learning and behavior changes due to RCK or mentioned that the program provided good reminders. For example, one parent said that they already "pay attention to their needs and spend time to improve the relationship with them," but learned that "you can understand a child's feelings by looking at their faces," and plans to do more listening. Another parent already talks with their child about

accepting others but learned the "importance of helping kids make decisions."

Behavior change was also noted through teacher evaluations, bolstering the premise that schools and families can successfully work together to teach children SEL skills. Two teachers shared examples of behavior change they noticed in their classroom over the course of the program. One teacher found her students grew in their ability to handle emotions: "I could tell kids got more aware of feelings. We spent a lot of time talking about emotions and recognizing and handling their feelings. Just talking about it more I've seen a difference in how kids handle their emotions." Another teacher shared a story of a specific child whose father actively engaged in applying the skills shared in RCK:

"I did see [behavior change]. I had one student who was really struggling with recess behaviors and not being the most kind. I know his parent was one of the parents who kept responding, "thank you, thank you." And I just noticed after ... we started emailing those out he just seemed to be more caring. We had less recess issues from him. And I do think it's because his dad especially was trying to implement them at home."

## PROGRAM ADAPTATIONS

RCK is showing promise as the foundational content in several other UW Madison Extension programs using different delivery methods. For example, the RCK content has been adapted to be shared via social media video. Short 3- to 5-minute videos have been created based on the RCK content and posted on the state extension Facebook page. These same videos have been downloaded onto tablets for incarcerated parents to view. RCK also formed the basis for a series of virtual Parent Cafés held on Zoom that were created to decrease parents' isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and safer at home mandates while teaching parents skills to support their children's SEL skills.

## LIMITATIONS

Although the study's sample size was a limitation, the team hypothesizes repeated efforts would yield similar results. Because of the recruitment method, we were able to document the number of schools requesting RCK materials but not the actual number of schools that implemented the program. Future plans include better tracking of schools delivering the program and the number of parents reached by each school.



## SUMMARY

In conclusion, parents, children, and schools benefit when SEL skills are practiced and modeled. The mechanisms through which we teach SEL skills do not need to be complicated. Frequent, emailed skill reminders boosted parent confidence and encouraged intentional SEL skill practice with children. Preliminary research with teachers also suggests that these emailed SEL resources not only increased parents' SEL teaching but also inspired teachers to include SEL content in their daily interactions with children.

RCK is a simple yet promising resource that has the potential to reduce emotional distress and promote positive social emotional behaviors. With content strongly rooted in a national SEL framework, (Blyth, D., Jones, S., & Borowski, T. 2018) the RCK materials can be used to pivot and reach parents through a wide variety of delivery methods. Children first learn about emotions and social skills in their family. RCK gives families the tools to be confident in how they teach SEL.



You may click here to access the references, tables, and graphs for this article.



### Solving Problems With Other People

**Conflict is a difference in the opinions or actions of two people or groups.**

**What we know:**

When adults solve a problem for a child, it may seem to work in the short term. However, it doesn't teach them how to solve the problem in the future. Children may also feel that their needs have not been considered. Coaching children through conflict helps them feel involved and allows them to practice and improve their own skills. The Raising Caring Kids video "Problem Solve" shows one way to help kids solve conflict.

Most children need adult guidance to help them manage conflict until they develop their own problem-solving skills. The way adults respond to children's conflicts can help or harm their ability to improve these skills. Parents and other caring adults can help children manage conflict by approaching it as a shared problem that can be solved by understanding all points of view and finding solutions that everyone can accept. You can identify and practice strategies to guide your child through a conflict.



**Try this:**

Try using these 5 steps to help your child calm down from Psychology Today before trying to resolve the conflict by:

- managing your own emotions,
- helping them feel connected to you,
- accepting their feelings,
- resisting the urge to punish, and
- helping them feel safe.

Conflict often generates strong feelings such as anger, sadness, or embarrassment. These feelings often get in the way of being able to solve a problem. Accept children's feelings and help them to manage them. When we patiently guide children in using basic problem-solving skills, we give them a chance to experience themselves as good problem-solvers who can talk directly with others when they're upset.



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**Table 1. Number of ideas learned by core SEL competency**

<b>Core competency</b>	<b># of mentions</b>
Social skills	21
Personal emotions	18
Empathy	13
Respect others	13
Positive self-identity	8
Responsible choices	8
Lifelong learner	7
Civic responsibility	2

Figure 1



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*Mindfulness is when you are aware of your feelings from moment-to-moment, and don't judge them as good or bad.*

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### **What we know:**

- Children feel stress, just like adults. They can be stressed about things like needing a ride, getting bullied at school, or being scared of the dark.
- Simple skills can help children handle stress. This short Raising Caring Kids "Mindfulness" video explains how deep breathing, journaling, and yoga all help children feel calm and better able to handle stress.

# Take a Deep Breath

Big emotions like anger or frustration can be hard for children to control. They may hit or yell to act out their feelings. Children feel more in control of their emotions and calmer in stressful situations when we teach them how to manage their emotions. There are a variety of strategies you can teach a child to calm down.



### **Try this:**

Practice breathing or mindfulness to help you and your child better deal with difficult emotions. [Mindful Schools shared research](#) showing that mindfulness creates changes in the brain that help us deal with emotions and stress. Mindfulness also helps children be more positive and liked by their peers

### **For fun:**

Create a [mindful jar](#) (as described by Mindful.org) with your child by filling a jar or empty water bottle with glitter and water. When your child gets upset, shake the jar and practice mindful breathing with them until the glitter settles to the bottom of the jar. Tell your child that strong feelings are just like the glitter when it is shaken up. There is glitter everywhere. When we are still and let a little time pass, our feelings settle like the glitter and our minds become clear again.



Figure 2: Confidence Level in Teaching SE Skills to Children (n=64)

