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Nurturing the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people during crises

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated lockdowns, school closures, physical distancing and loss of familiar environments. The restriction on movement, disruption of routines, curtailment of social interactions and deprivation of traditional learning methods has led to increased pressure, stress and anxiety for young people, their families and communities.

Parents and adult care-givers are struggling to meet the challenges of home schooling while juggling work and community obligations, caring for family members and maintaining individual well-being. Teachers are having to rapidly adapt to new and untested teaching methods. Young people are concerned about their education as national examinations are cancelled and are grappling with the insecurity of isolation and uncertainty. In poor households where income is a first priority, children are left on their own to home school or are pulled into other tasks. The stress and anxiety of the pandemic is compounded by the circulation of dynamic information - both accurate and false, often fuelled by

sensationalist media reporting. This not only increases insecurity but also acts as fertile ground for the spread of intolerance, racism, xenophobia and hate crimes.

To address and counter the social anxiety, emotional upheaval and fearful insecurity unleashed by COVID-19, it is urgent and necessary that families and communities build vital coping skills and emotional resilience. Social and emotional skills are well established, evidence-based practices, that can be adapted to help equip children, young people, parents and teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours they need to stay healthy and positive, navigate emotions, practice mindful engagement, exhibit pro-social behaviour and cope with daily challenges.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Any crisis, whether a tsunami, civil unrest or COVID-19, provokes strong negative emotional responses such as panic, stress, anxiety, anger and fear. Building social and emotional learning (SEL) skills can enable behaviour to address stressful situations with calm and emotionally regulated responses and strengthen critical thinking to permit more informed decision making and action (Arslan & Demirtas, 2016). Fear and stress also have a detrimental impact on health and the ability to learn (Immordino Yang & Damasio, 2007). For all learners, young and old, learning is affected by stress and insecurity. Only when the brain is socially connected and emotionally secure can it focus on academic content and engage in learning.

Evidence and lessons learned in past practices and the current crisis

Research shows that SEL can be taught like any other scholastic subject. In times of crisis, adults and parents take on the role of teachers and can build SEL skills in children and young people. Family projects can be designed around arts and education including learning about the crisis itself. For instance, research shows that children are naturally altruistic (Warneken, 2013). Thus, encouraging activities that motivate the natural altruistic inclinations may be promoted. Such prosocial behaviour will not only activate reward circuits in the brain that help convert negative emotions, like fear and anger, to positive emotions, like hope and confidence, (Willard *et al.*, 2019) but will also enable people to calm themselves when angry, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices.

Mandate SEL skills for everyone all the time. Children, young people and adults can all benefit from SEL skills. They are not a therapy for children and youth with behavioural issues but rather a part of lifelong learning and growth. For children and adolescents in particular, explicit training in SEL skills enables them to express themselves fully and clearly, develop better and healthier relationships with peers and adults and feel more connected.

SEL is strongly linked to academic performance and comprehensive development of students' competency. Research shows that good SEL skills explicitly introduced in curricula are strongly correlated with increased academic performance (Zins, Weissberg, Wang and Walberg, 2004). Learning media and visual arts, theatre, dance, or music has great intrinsic benefits for children and young people, as they are exposed to creative humanistic experiences and the potential for deep and lasting skill development.

SEL skills improve the economy. The lack of SEL in education systems can result in potential losses in economic productivity, as high as 29% of Gross National Income (Duraiappah and Sethi, 2020).

SEL in context of crises. Evidence from crisis-affected countries demonstrates that adverse effects of stress and anxiety can be mitigated when children have positive and nurturing relationships with

parents, caregivers and teachers who demonstrate good SEL skills, create opportunities for explicit SEL learning activities and provide a safe and predictable learning environment, allowing them heal from traumatic experiences and return to normal life. (INEE, 2018).

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy & programmatic interventions

For policy-makers/government institutions:

Provide all members of the learning community with reliable, evidence-based information about COVID 19, how to avoid its spread and how to build SEL skills – Teachers, learners and their families require simple and factual information on how to stay healthy in order to restore a sense of certainty and control, and provide a course of action. Provide locally adapted resources to support educators, parents, and anyone who works with children and youth to sustain learning with a focus on SEL skills using television, radio, mobile learning platforms and other means where possible, and as relevant.

Support and care for teachers, and prioritize teacher training on SEL – Ensure that proper attention is given to SEL as part of teacher professional development during confinement on the use and development of distance learning modalities. Enable teachers to acquire and leverage ICT skills to deliver digital scalable learning solutions that are fun, rewarding, multisensory, immersive, experiential, and performance-based. (Example of resources: <https://mgiep.unesco.org/global-citizenship>).

Harness the outreach of digital media, radio and television for the dissemination of key messages that foster individual and community resilience - Engage with media, especially those ensuring distance learning during the crisis, to broadcast messages of tolerance, encouraging mutual support and fostering compassion, showing similarities with contexts in other countries.

Contextualize psychosocial support and SEL in emergencies and crisis-affected contexts – Undertake careful needs assessment to contextualize interventions, adapt curriculum and teaching and learning methods to the situation of school closure and home isolation; adjust the content to address emerging and rapidly changing issues. Ensure that SEL is taught by those adults who are well themselves and can model healthy behaviour to children. Keep gender and social inclusion in focus to prevent and reduce gender-based and domestic (including sexual) violence and discrimination, which often rise in emergency situations.

In the longer term:

Promote the mainstreaming of SEL throughout education (formal, non-formal and informal) and at all levels - Mainstream SEL in formal education in an integrated fashion, with programmes at elementary, primary and secondary level. SEL-related competencies should be prioritized and considered as part of core learning outcomes with sufficient time allocated for their development in the curriculum and extra-curricular activities within a positive psycho-social school environment. **Effective SEL programmes** are rights-based, scientifically accurate and grounded in evidence, participatory and inclusive, gender-responsive, culturally appropriate and carefully adapted for specific age groups. They have the power to transform harmful social norms and practices emerging in crisis situations and promote gender equity. Effective SEL programmes should also be **part of a larger ecosystem**, reaching beyond classroom to involve the whole school, families, communities and media (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago and Fundación Súmate (2020).

Ensure SEL instruction and practice for teachers - Include SEL in pre and in-service teacher education and professional development programmes to address stress and boost social and emotional competencies in the classroom. Ensure school administrations allocate time and opportunity for in-

service teachers to acquire SEL skills, which have been found effective in promoting well-being, reducing psychological distress, and improving classroom interactions (Jennings, P.A. (2019), Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009)). Promote communities of practices between teachers within the same schools and among different schools to encourage continuous learning and improvement.

Additional guidance for educational institutions/schools, young people, teachers and parents

Encourage communication and networking among and with teachers to promote continuous pedagogical learning, mutual support and wellbeing.

Encourage health-promoting, mindfulness and kindness practices– including healthy eating habits, regular exercise and sleeping hours. Follow a flexible but structured daily routine, which includes time to do something fun or relaxing. Fostering mental health is paramount. Promote mindfulness practices, as appropriate. Kindness and compassionate behaviours are not only rewarding but also distracting and build positive thoughts. Example of resource: UNESCO MGIEP’s campaign #KindnessMatters (<https://mgiep.unesco.org/kindness; Stress and Coping>); Series of *Bouba et Zaza* videos; [Smeshariki videos](#) include ABC of Kindness series (in Russian).

Emphasize the value of arts, culture and play to promote wellbeing - Play is learning and helps developing creativity, motor skills and decision-making. It also reduces anxiety and develops emotional resilience. Use music, dance, painting etc. to bolster communication and interpersonal skills, as well as cognitive development, from concentration to risk-taking. Parents and educators can use music to introduce and build a vocabulary of emotions (Nawrot 2003). (Resource: **#KeepMakingArt**: the COVID-19 crisis has prompted a global movement by arts educators to boost hope and togetherness among children, young people, parents and artists <https://creative-generation.org/blog-1/keepmakingart-a-campaign-to-inspire-hope-and-connection>)

Support teens’ social connection and foster responsible online behaviour - Help teens stay connected with friends via social media networks and other safe distancing ways. Use this opportunity to remind them about safety in digital spaces and opportunities to develop digital skills. (Resources: [Get Digital](#) by Facebook launched in partnership with ISTE and UNESCO IITE; Share your story: UNESCO’s Associated Schools Network is collecting and sharing coping stories as part of its #LearningNeverStops campaign. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/learningneverstops/>)

Encourage games and audio resources for learning – Introduce children to online and other games that promote social, emotional and academic learning. Encourage them to practice academic skills at home – for example, using maths to calculate amounts in recipes. Cook together, sharing failure over spoilt recipes and success over successful dishes. Utilize also audio resources, such as short stories narrated by book authors, stories with music, etc., Example of resource: [UNESCO MGIEP FramerSpace.com](#)

Talk to young people openly – Encourage open debate and critical thinking, for example by organizing virtual or other debates and asking learners to debunk information (guidance can be found in the *Media and Information Literacy* toolkits¹), focusing on talking about COVID-19 and the myths associated to it by relying on proven scientific sources. Examples can be found on the World Health Organization’s website². Where possible encourage virtual exchanges with peers in other parts of the world by capitalizing on existing school networks. Resources: the [World Health Organization Q&A page](#).

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/communication-and-information/covid19-informationsharing-counteringdisinformation/resource-center>

² <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

Key references

Socio and emotional learning and related skills

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Armand Doucet, Dr Deborah Netolicky, Koen Timmers and Francis Jim Tuscano (2020). Thinking about Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic: An Independent Report on Approaches to Distance Learning During COVID19 School Closures https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_research_covid-19_eng?fr=sYTY3OTEwMzc2ODU

Psychosocial support and SEL in crisis contexts

UNESCO (2014). Stay safe and be prepared: a student's/teacher's/parent's guide to disaster risk reduction.

UNESCO (2017). Reconstruir sin ladrillos (Building without bricks) - tools for response, preparedness and recovery in emergency contexts http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Santiago/pdf/Guia_completa_educacion_emergencias.pdf

EducationLinks (2018). Social and Emotional Learning in Crisis and Conflict Settings <https://www.edulinks.org/learning/social-and-emotional-learning-crisis-and-conflict-settings>

Additional materials for educators/parents/adults related to COVID-19

UNICEF. Toolkit to spread awareness and take action on COVID-19 <https://www.voicesofyouth.org/media/19701/download>

UNICEF. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): What parents should know <https://www.unicef.org/stories/novel-coronavirus-outbreak-what-parents-should-know>

World Health Organization. Parenting in the time of COVID-19 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/healthy-parenting>

World Health Organization. Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 Outbreak. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/mental-health-and-psychosocial-considerations-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>

Parenting for Lifelong Health. COVID-19 online resources: 24/7 Parenting resources in multiple languages. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Covid – 19 Daily life and coping <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/>

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About UNESCO Education Sector’s Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector’s issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by UNESCO's Global Citizenship and Peace Education Section & the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development.

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UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response



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