

Hearing loss & social and emotional wellbeing

The social, emotional, intellectual and physical aspects of a child's development are all connected. Each influences the other. It is not uncommon for children who have difficulties that affect them socially and emotionally to also face challenges in meeting the demands of school. Schools are where students spend the majority of their day and are in contact with people other than their family members, including teachers. Teachers can improve the wellbeing and mental health of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing through their support and care, role modelling, encouragement and being aware of students' needs (Farmer, Lines & Hamm, 2011).

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

In the Australian Curriculum, the term 'Personal and Social Capability' is used interchangeably with the synonym Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The Australian Curriculum recognises the need for students to develop personal and social capability. This enables them to manage themselves and their relationships with others (ACARA, 2013, pg 82). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring particular skills, capabilities or personal strengths that contribute to resilience and wellbeing.

A number of skills and strengths have been identified that help achieve a state of social and emotional wellbeing (sometimes called mental health). These skills may also help maintain or re-establish wellbeing when faced with change or challenges; this capacity is called resilience.

What are the SEL capabilities?



Image: (ACARA, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/>)

“The West Australian Foundation for Deaf Children recognises Telethon Kids Institute, Telethon Speech and Hearing and School of Special Education Needs: Sensory for their work on the Telethon Belong Project and production of these Belong Resources.”

Social Emotional Learning capabilities

Self-awareness skills help us to recognise and understand our feelings, while valuing our strengths and abilities. These skills include:

- being able to identify what we are feeling
- understanding why we might feel a certain way
- recognising and having confidence to use our strengths and abilities

Self-management skills enable us to handle and direct our emotions in appropriate ways. These skills include:

- managing our emotions so they don't stop us from effectively dealing with situations
- striving to achieve our goals despite difficulties

Social awareness skills help us to be aware and respectful of the feelings and perspectives of others.

These skills include:

- recognising what others may be feeling
- trying to understand a situation from another's point of view
- accepting and valuing people who are different from ourselves

Social management skills help us to deal positively with relationship problems and conflicts. These skills include:

- making friends and maintaining healthy relationships
- dealing effectively with conflicts
- seeking help if we are not able to solve a social problem ourselves
- considering how these choices may affect ourselves and others

*“Definitely focusing on their strengths (is important), because they've got strengths and they might not be able to know those strengths themselves but getting them to understand that they do have strengths, and then getting other children to see what those strengths are....” –
Teacher of the Deaf*

Why is Social and Emotional Learning important?

Children with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to:

- manage themselves
- relate to others
- develop resilience and a sense of self-worth
- resolve conflict
- engage in teamwork
- feel positive about themselves and the world around them

Research shows that children with social and emotional skills have improved (Durlak, 2011):

- quality of learning
- sense of belonging
- study skills
- school attendance
- attention

And increased:

- academic competence
- motivation to learn
- commitment to school

Impact of hearing loss on Social and Emotional Learning and practical strategies

The social dynamic of the school environment can be challenging for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to connect with others. It can be more difficult for them to understand or relate to what another person might think, feel or believe in certain situations. This information is key to developing skills of social information processing such as emotional recognition, perspective taking, ability to empathise and problem solving.

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, in particular, benefit from explicit teaching and learning activities that focus on the importance of inclusion. Empathy-based activities, especially taking different perspectives of relevant individuals and groups, as well as practice in decision-making processes that can be applied to different social situations are also beneficial for the students.

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may experience difficulties with: Communication competence

Communication challenges experienced by students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may impede the development of social skills and restrict their social relationships. They may feel they are not part of the group due to communication difficulties which could affect their social behaviour. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may miss the subtleties of speech, such as the tone and intonation. This can cause misunderstandings and possibly impact their social awareness and relationships.

Tips for social skills

Social skills can be taught, practised and learned. Helping students who are Deaf or hard of hearing learn how to initiate, respond to, and maintain positive social interactions with their peers, as well as how to show empathy, deal with frustration, conflict and rejection will give them skills to communicate better.

To help students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to engage and develop their social skills in class activities:

- Include formal social skills training in the class setting or individually. Teach rules that are normally implicit e.g. unwritten playground rules.
- Create non-threatening social experiences such as smaller group sizes so the students who are Deaf or hard of hearing can hear better and build up self-confidence in social settings.
- Try using pairs in activities to give the students who are Deaf or hard of hearing a chance to focus on just one person at a time and form connections. Mix up the pairings regularly.
- Cooperative classroom projects can help students who are Deaf or hard of hearing who need to improve their social connections. This gives them time to work on developing the small group cooperative skills while getting to know classmates in a safe environment.

- Give students who are Deaf or hard of hearing opportunities to share peer-related concerns, one-on-one or in small groups.

Self-esteem and self-image

How someone feels about their hearing status — being Deaf or hard of hearing — is an important part of what shapes their identity. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may experience feelings of poor self-image and self-esteem, related to devices they wear (i.e. hearing aid) or their abilities to communicate and socialise. The ability of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to interact comfortably with other students who are Deaf or hard of hearing and typically hearing students has a positive impact on their identity. Difficulties with communication can impact on a student who is Deaf or hard of hearing's peer relationships and consequently their identity development and self-esteem.

“Encouraging them to do things that they’re good at, because, I mean, everybody has got a skill” – Student

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing with positive self-esteem will:

- State when they can't hear something or have misheard something.
- Say they have a hearing loss.
- Not be afraid to talk or sign in public.
- Wear their hearing aids and/or cochlear implant and FM system if it is beneficial to them and not be concerned if it is visible to others.
- Realise there are others who also have a hearing loss and possibly seek out these people for friendship.

Tips for self-identity and self-esteem

- Help students to think about and develop their strengths and abilities while scaffolding their weaknesses, e.g. 'if a child is good in art, but does not feel confident in speaking, use the time in art and allow the student time to communicate about their drawing to their class'
- Encourage and scaffold students to 'have-a-go' at new activities.
- Encourage students to be open and honest with their feelings – it is okay for them to show their feelings in ways that do not hurt others.
- Help students find solutions to problems rather than giving them the answers. Ask questions like, “What could you do?” and “What do you think?”
- Take time to have a conversation and listen to students and show them that you value what they have to say. You can do this by commenting and asking questions based on their interests. Make eye contact.

“Targeting their [students] interests is a really good starting point... and I’ve found that it works really well to [make] them feel confident” – Teacher of the Deaf

Adapted from STARS- Straight talking about self-esteem, Erceg, E & Roberts, C. Curtin University

Tips for Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is the ability to put our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs into language and to understand that other people have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of their own. Research shows that students with hearing loss can have significant delays in the development of Theory of Mind due to reduced auditory access to the conversational language around them. Language barriers may affect a student who is Deaf or hard of hearing individual’s cognitive ability and executive function (Hauser, 2006) and their ability to understand and share the emotional states of others and develop friendships (Dunn, 2004). Significant developmental delays of key Theory of Mind skills can negatively impact the future social relationships and academic achievement of students.

When students have difficulty developing their Theory of Mind, it makes it difficult for them to:

- understand why people do and say the things they do
- have a conversation
- understand characters’ perspectives in stories
- make friends
- take another person’s point of view
- recognise and understand sarcasm
- infer the intentions of others
- understand the emotions of others

To develop Theory of Mind in the classroom:

- Teach about feelings and emotions
- Teach students how to recognise and understand the feelings and emotions of others e.g.: through media or role plays
- Increase students' awareness that others have their own thoughts and ideas
- Explore the perspective of others in the class
- Practise social interactions and communication
- Role play and rehearse social situations and dilemmas

Establishing and maintaining friendships and peer group relationships

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may feel they are not part of the group due to communication difficulties. This may affect their social behaviour and they may become withdrawn or overly assertive. Dammeyer (2009) reported that children with hearing loss were 3.7 times more likely to report psychosocial problems, relative to children without hearing loss.

Friendships play an important role in how all students cope at school. Some students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may exhibit less mature social skills and report having fewer quality friendships. By helping students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to develop friendships and mix with social groups, you provide them with important protective factors for their future.

Children who have friends:

- feel happier at school
- are less likely to be bullied
- are able to cope better if they are bullied
- see their classmates as friendly and caring
- develop positive attitudes to school and learning

Tips for friendships

To develop friendship skills in the classroom:

- Include cooperative games and activities to develop inclusiveness
- Teach students about healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Engage students in role-plays or media related to making friends, reciprocated friendships and the qualities of a good friend
- Teach conflict resolution and assertiveness skills
- Teach about peer pressure and include problem solving scenarios

Tips for emotions and emotional regulation

Everyone has feelings and we experience a wide range of emotions every day so it is very important for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to learn how to recognise, label and manage their own emotions. This in turn allows these students to understand other people's feelings and respond appropriately to them. Unfortunately, because some students may not be familiar with or understand the challenges faced by students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, you may find they react by making inappropriate comments about, or make fun of, or tease this student.

For this reason, it helps to work with all of the students in your class to develop skills for recognising and appreciating the feelings of others. By engaging students in activities to explore the emotions and perspectives of others you will also be developing empathy.

To increase understanding around emotions and emotional regulation:

- Engage students in activities to recognise and label emotions
- Expand the emotional vocabulary of students
- Use literature to explore the emotions of characters
- Teach students about hurt feelings
- Talk about hurtful or playful teasing
- Teach emotional management strategies
- Teach about dealing with difficult or unpleasant emotions
- Teach about positive self-talk and positive mindset
- Explore empathy through stories of others

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