

### Introduction

Research shows that children's wellbeing and the development of social and emotional skills are linked to improved behaviour, higher academic achievement and more positive outcomes later in life. Programs designed to promote social and emotional learning often result in an improvement in children's skills and a reduction in the incidence of challenging and disruptive behaviours.

Social and emotional wellbeing is closely related to resilience and mental health. It is an integral part of effective and high-quality teaching practice and should be reflected in the learning environment, curriculum and pedagogy, policy and procedures, and partnerships with community and families.

In the *Student Voices* film, the children share their experiences and perspectives about wellbeing, including supportive environments. Their dialogue was unscripted, forming a collection of honest reflections. The *Student Voices* film provides the opportunity to reflect on the nature of wellbeing from the child's perspective.

The film is organised into five segments. The rationale behind each is addressed below and a series of activities follows. A selection of activities has been provided. It is not intended that all of the activities are used, but serve as options in the exploration of this material.

### Caring and Connectedness

The presence of at least one caring person who conveys compassion and understanding can provide support for healthy development and learning. Educators have the capacity to assume a meaningful support role for children. A teacher can influence a child's motivation, enthusiasm and engagement through the creation of a safe and supportive classroom.

An ethos of caring that is reflected in the culture, practices and policies of the whole school or centre community contributes to a sense of connectedness, which in itself is a key resilience protective factor. Caring schools, centres and classrooms are communities that explore learning in the contexts of children's own lives. They also recognise the value of building partnerships with families and the wider community.

Connectedness occurs when children feel accepted, valued, respected, and included in a school's or centre's social context. This extends beyond the parameters of the classroom to include families, social groups and the school's wider community. Connectedness relates to an individual's fundamental need to 'belong' and develop an identity. This sense of belonging is strongly linked to the environment and social context. The social climate of a school or centre can enhance connectedness.

In the *Student Voices* film children talk about their learning environment, their teachers and life at school. The importance of caring and connectedness is evident in their reflections.

### Competence and Achievements

Research indicates that when schools establish high expectations for children within a supportive environment, high rates of academic success and lower rates of problem behaviours result.

At the core of a supportive relationship are clear and positive expectations that guide behaviour and challenge the individual to extend beyond their known capabilities. Crucial to this is the teacher's own knowledge of the individual's capability, their learning style and their motivators. Teachers who promote high expectations will also convey respect, provide guidance and build on the strengths and interests of class members.

Successful schools enhance a culture of achievement by offering support to help teachers and children achieve their goals. A culture of high expectations will draw upon children's and teachers' life experiences and cultural contexts and provide varied opportunities for success in and out of the classroom, recognising both academic and non-academic achievements.

In the *Student Voices* film the children talk with pride about their achievements. They relate the support they received from adults in helping them to achieve their goals.

### Contribution and Participation

Children need and value opportunities for meaningful contribution and participation in their world. This includes being given meaningful responsibilities, having real decision-making power, feeling included and heard and thus creating a sense of ownership, belonging and connectedness. A climate of equality and mutual respect allows opportunities to be offered. Participation occurs through a focus on hands-on learning, cooperative group work and problem solving activities, interest based curriculum planning and reflective evaluation strategies.

In the *Student Voices* film the children refer to some of the opportunities provided for them to contribute to the broader school community and participate in school life by their involvement in decision-making processes, having responsibility for a range of activities, and having the chance to achieve in and outside the school.

### Student Engagement

Student engagement occurs when children's interests are captured and they become absorbed in and connected with their learning. While teachers are required to teach curriculum that is prescribed by relevant state and territory authorities, children will more readily learn when connections are made between that content and their own lives.

In the *Student Voices* film, the children refer to their teachers making learning interesting, engaging and relevant. Their responses speak of classrooms where learning is an enjoyable experience and places where they feel supported and motivated.

### Support

Support comes in various forms. Support can be physical, emotional, community, individual or even financial. Schools can convey support for personal growth through the provision of diverse opportunities in the curriculum and beyond. Schools that recognise the importance of a solid support network will have taken these elements into consideration and will promote learner wellbeing using strategies that cover all these aspects of the learning environment.

Some individuals and groups of children require additional, more targeted support and this is an integral part of the school's approach as a whole. The whole school approach where wellbeing and social and emotional learning is embedded within school structures will promote a supportive caring learning environment for all students regardless of learning style and ability. Children in turn will model these strategies in their own relationships with peers, teachers and families.

In the *Student Voices* film, the children mention various sources of support and how important this is for them. They speak about their friends, family and the school community and infer that rather than simply being something that happens in times of adversity, ongoing support is vital in creating a sense of security.

### References and Further Reading

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

NSW Commission for Children and Young People. (2007). *Ask the children: Overview of children's understandings of wellbeing*. Retrieved December 6, 2007, from: [www.kids.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au)

**Student Activity One:**

The *Student Voices* film offers teachers the opportunity to reflect on what children value.

Watch the film and make a list of the key themes expressed by these children.

Working in small groups, compare your own list with other members of your group. Divide your collective list into the following two groups;

- Internal aspects specific to the individual eg temperament and personality.
- External aspects such as relationships with others, responsibilities and school approaches.

Discuss as a group how these internal and external aspects potentially impact on the student's school experience.

**Student Activity Two:**

The school setting is much more than a place of academic instruction. After viewing the *Student Voices* film, discuss the children's reflections of what school means to them.

Do you think this might be different depending on the child's age? Explain.

**Student Activity Three:**

View the *Student Voices* film and either as individuals or in small groups answer the following questions:

- What do the children in the film value about their lives? Make a list of specific examples.
- Read about the three overarching themes of Agency, Security and Positive Sense of Self as outlined in the paper referred to below. Compare your list with these three themes, or other elements identified in the article.
- Discuss the ways that teachers can create opportunities for children to engage in meaningful decision making, responsibility taking and problem solving.

**Reference:**

NSW Commission for Children and Young People. (2007). *Ask the children: Overview of children's understandings of wellbeing*. Retrieved December 6, 2007, from: [www.kids.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au)

**Student Activity Four:**

A positive and supportive environment where children experience a sense of belonging is vital to social and emotional wellbeing. Schools have an important role to play in creating such a space. It is important to consider the role of the family and community in shaping wellbeing and the school's capacity to work in partnership with families and the community.

Working individually or in small groups, make a list of what you might see, hear, and feel within a school that values and actively builds collaborative relationships with families. For example:

**SEE:** Teachers working with parents to negotiate individual goals for children and family diversity represented in the classroom environment.

**HEAR:** Teachers talking about important community events from a local perspective.

**FEEL:** A sense of connectedness with parents feeling welcomed within the school setting.

Share your responses in discussion.

**Student Activity Five:**

In the *Student Voices* film, children speak about the ways that teachers and other adults in their lives demonstrate that the children are valued and respected both in and outside the school environment.

A caring supportive environment is one that fosters and nurtures relationships. Divide into three groups. Each group will consider one of the significant relationships listed below.

Using the film to guide you, discuss the children's reflections on the importance of their relationship with;

- Friends
- Teachers
- Families.

**Student Activity Six:**

The children in the *Student Voices* film talk about feelings of competence and achievement in reference to the school, their families and within the community.

Hold a discussion on the concept of success. You might find that this discussion could include the concept of failure as well. Start by identifying the successes mentioned by the children in the film and expand from this. The following questions might help guide your discussion:

- What sorts of things do children see as successes?
- How might a parent's view of success differ from or be similar to a child's?
- How can teachers ensure that all children are given the opportunity to succeed?
- How does a child know he or she has succeeded?
- What place do physical rewards play? Are there any pitfalls with these types of awards?
- How can success be fostered in a classroom?