

SEL in the Time of Distance Learning: An Online Resource for Educators Concerned About Children's Coping Skills

(Narration appears in italics throughout this lesson.)

Lesson # 2: Understanding the Power of Your Brain

Always begin your class meeting with a Check-In.

A check in is a very important part of each session/lesson/meeting. "Checking in" with each other involves naming and acknowledging feelings, and is a great way to connect members of the group with each other, creating a sense of community. Checking In allows students to pause at the beginning of a session and, by naming their feelings, free up cognitive processing power for engagement in the session. Research has suggested that the check-in activity builds empathy among group members and strengthens group connections. Students are permitted to pass. If time is a problem, hand signals can be used by students to participate in the check in (thumb up, thumb horizontal, or thumb down).

Today's Check In: Ask students to pick a color that represents how they feel at the moment. Have students volunteer to explain what that color means to them. Then have students write the answers to the following questions in their journal:

- 1. What color did you pick?***
- 2. What does that color represent/mean to you?***
- 3. Did anyone else pick the color you picked? What reason did they give for picking that color?***
- 4. Did you change your mind after listening to other students in the class?***
- 5. In what ways did you learn that other people in the class are similar to you? Different from you?***

Show Video about the Brain

Lesson on How Our Brains Work:

Our brains are all different. Each time we have a thought, feeling, or action, our brains begin to change as a result of new information. Scientists call this “plasticity.” Because we all have different experiences, our brains are unique and different from each other. In the same family, even brothers and sisters or twins show differences in their brain’s structures. This means that we can learn new things all of our lives. Our brains adapt and change all the time.

When you were born, your brain came with neurons, tiny cells that help you learn things. When you learn things, your brain sends messages from one neuron to another. If you do the same thing enough times, your brain makes a path between neurons. This makes doing that activity easier and quicker.

Think of learning to ride a bike. At first it was hard to balance the bike, peddle, and steer in the direction you wanted to go. But, as you practiced, it became easier and easier. After enough practice, you could ride your bike well without thinking about those things. Your brain is like a muscle. The more you practice something, the more automatic the behavior becomes.

But...Our brains also like patterns that they can recognize. Brains become uncomfortable when things that happen don’t match a pattern that is recognized. Our behavior often follows a pattern we are comfortable with. Patterns make our lives easier and allow us to interact with each other in a consistent or efficient way. We have many patterns in our lives that we don’t have to think about. We obey traffic signals, get up on at a certain time so we can be ready for school, argue with a brother or sister without thinking about it. Sometimes this pattern of behavior works well and sometimes it doesn’t. When our behavior doesn’t work well, it is sometimes easier for our brains to ignore others who think differently or who upset us, rather than listening carefully and working together.

In your journals, make a list of patterns that are working well in school. Why do these patterns work well?

Now, make a list of some patterns that are not working as well.

Have the students identify and share 3 patterns that are working well and 2 patterns that are not.

Debrief: Guide the students in this discussion.

1. What are the advantages of your patterns? Remember that patterns must be “sort of working” or you would not continue them.

2. What are the challenges of your patterns? Remember that even patterns that are working can have challenges.

3. If you want to change a pattern, first you must be aware of it. How could you work to change a pattern that is not working?

Your assignment for practicing the skills of this lesson is to choose two patterns you have identified and watch them carefully. Write your observations in your journal each day. We will discuss what you have noticed about your patterns in the next class.