



*Jennifer Miller, an expert on families and social and emotional learning, is the author of a popular blog, [Confident Parents, Confident Kids](#) and a longtime CASEL collaborator. She first discovered the power of SEL when working on dropout prevention as a VISTA volunteer many years ago. Ten years ago, when she became a parent, she discovered the lack of research-based advice about SEL for parents. That inspired her to start her blog, which now has 22,500 subscribers and 40,000 views per year from 152 countries. Here she shares practical advice for communicating with parents, families, and caregivers.*

### **On the importance of teaching SEL skills and habits in schools.**

It's a major concern of parents. On the 2014 [NBC State of Parenting Survey](#), the vast majority of parents said social and communications skills were of top importance, more than academics or getting good grades. The 2017 [Learning Heroes survey](#) found the same. And there isn't much difference across grade levels.

Self-management comes up very frequently—how do I deal with emotions, my own and my child's? And then responsible decision-making. For parents of adolescents, for instance, that takes on a whole new meaning. Kids are impulsive and need to take risks. What do you do as a parent when that kicks in?

### **On teaching self-management.**

A big challenge is that our culture is not accustomed to talking about feelings. It feels like a weakness. So it's important to work at integrating “feeling words” into family conversations—word like “frustrated,” “hurt,” “anger,” and “jealousy.” Having words helps kids be better able to self-manage. Language opens the door to self-reflection.

### **On teaching responsible decision-making.**

This is often more challenging because it is so painful for parents to see their child either causing pain or suffering, or going through it. They just want it to stop. The first step is for parents to self-manage, to calm down when the child tells them that he's wrecked the car. Take time to be reflective. Make this a learning opportunity. Just punishing the child doesn't allow them to experience the consequence of their action. The habitual response is “you're grounded.” A better response is, “How can we fix what's broken?”

### **On the importance of parent SEL.**

The great challenge for parents is how to manage your own emotions. Parenting is so deeply personal. The very nature of child development will raise a parent's own volcano of emotions. For instance, toddlers go through a stage when they are hitting, but knowing that doesn't always help a parent who remembers being hit as a child and wants to nurse his or her own wounds. Parents need to unpack what they're feeling. I tell them, "You're going to get emotional. Let's plan for it so you're ready." Our *Caregivers Guide* (upcoming from CASEL) has an Emotional Safety Plan. It might mean saying, "Mommy needs five minutes." Then close your eyes, calm down, breathe, reflect and come up with a plan to re-enter the situation.

We all plan for fires, even though only one in four of us ever experiences them. But we don't plan for emotional fires even if every single parent has them.

### **On 5 things teachers can do.**

You don't have to do a big parent engagement initiative. Many small things build the trusting relationships that are at the heart of this work. Hang out at pick-up time, make conversation, send home pictures of students learning. All of these say, "I care. I connect."

In terms of specifics: First, create multiple vehicles for parent voices—not just parent nights but online engagement, answering email, being available at churches and other places where parents are. Second, instead of coming in to "train parents," begin by listening and finding out what assets they already have. Explore ways to capitalize on them. Third, help parents remember that the relationship is between the child and the teacher. Help them empower their child with the conversational tools to go to the teacher himself instead of parents doing an end-run. Fourth, go to where parents are—such as community events, meet-and-greets, or coffee shops. And fifth, make sure cultural aspects of the child's background are clearly represented in the school building.

### **On extra steps principals can take.**

It's about shaping the culture. Create and invest in caring relationships, get to know children and their families, and show that this is a priority for the school. Principals also play a key role in establishing a discipline structure. If a child is sent to the principal's office, instead of seeing it as a punishment, use it as an opportunity to learn more about the child's emotional needs. Maybe he'd benefit from an after-school program or other support that provides lots of caring attention.

### **On what to say to those who are skeptical about schools' role.**

SEL is happening in every single school whether we want it or not. Educators teach about relationships and emotions through their interactions. It's the everyday culture. Schools that have become intentional and work on skill-building are the ones that give students the opportunities to build these essential life skills. And they are better able to prepare students achieving for today and in their future.

## Resources

[CASEL website](#), with multiple resources for parents and families. Including Jenn Miller's Top 10 book recommendations.

[Confident Parents, Confident Kids](#) blog. For parents of children aged 4-21, with curated articles and practical, research-based advice. Most popular tools: (1) advice on parent-teacher conversations and (2) the role of stories in shaping a child's social and emotional development.

[NBC Parent Toolkit](#), with especially strong guidance on the ages and stages of child development.

[Edutopia](#), with strong resources for educators and parents alike.

[Making Caring Common Project](#). Videos and articles from this Harvard-based initiative.

[Great Schools](#). Online parent portal with excellent videos on SEL and academic milestones, grade by grade.

A new guide for parents and caregivers from CASEL developed in collaboration with Jennifer Miller and Latinos Progresando will be published next month. Watch the CASEL website for updates.

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