

## How Do We Support Newcomers' Social Emotional Needs?

Positive emotional well-being correlates with higher rates of academic engagement, a sense of belonging and connectedness in school, and academic motivation, and may reduce conduct problems, drug use, and violence (Suárez-Orozco, Pimental, & Martin, 2009; Botvin, Baker, Dusenbery, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995; Chiu, Pong, Mori, & Chow, 2012).

### Social Emotional Supports

Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin (2009) note that “successful adaptations among immigrant students appear to be linked to the quality of relationships that they forge in their school settings. ...Social relations provide a variety of protective functions—a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, cognitive guidance, and positive feedback. ...Relationships with peers, for example, provide emotional sustenance that supports the development of significant psychosocial competencies in youth. ...In addition, connections with teachers, counselors, coaches, and other supportive adults in school are important in the academic and social adaptation of adolescents and appear to be particularly important to immigrant adolescents” ” (p. 717)<sup>1</sup>.

As school staff establish culturally relevant programs and practices that support newcomers, it is critical for them to consider the unique aspects of immigration and how being an immigrant can affect a student. For example:

- Immigrants and refugees may experience stress from cultural changes and acculturation (Birman, 2002).
- As immigrants learn new cultural expectations and customs (and sometimes, a new language), they may feel pressured to become more “American” without understanding what that means (Birman, 2002).
- Many immigrants may feel that they must choose between their home culture and the new culture (Berry & Vedder, 2016) while establishing a secure identity amidst competing social pressures (Chiu et al., 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn. 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Bal & Perzigian, 2013).
- Immigrant students may feel alienated culturally and socially, even if they experience academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- Immigrants may experience stressors that differ from those experienced by their non-immigrant peers, such as loss of social support, the need to learn a new language, and navigation of unfamiliar systems to access services when they arrive in the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).
- Current events and media coverage may contribute to a rise in discrimination, bullying, racial slurs, and possible hate crimes against individuals based upon their actual or perceived race,

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<sup>1</sup> Suárez-Orozco, C., Pimentel, A., & Martin, M. (2009, March). The significance of relationships: Academic engagement and achievement among newcomer immigrant youth. *Teachers College Record*, 111(3), 712– 749. Retrieved from <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/immigration.olde/pdf/2009/EngagementTCR.pdf>

ethnicity, national origin, or religion, such as those from Arab or majority-Muslim countries, from Mexico, or from Central or South American countries.

To establish supports that are appropriate and effective, it is critical for educators to acknowledge newcomers' individual strengths, the resilience they developed through the immigration process, and their rich potential for building on life experiences and prior schooling (Birman, 2002). Moreover, educators need to recognize that newcomers have diverse characteristics, including home language, age at entry, family structure, and socioeconomic status. A student's culture may limit interactions with different genders or professions.

### **Social Emotional Skills Development**

Stavsky (2015) analyzed four frameworks that have been developed to identify skills, attitudes, and behaviors associated with long-term social emotional development. According to Stavsky these frameworks have in common five competencies central to social emotional development:

1. Intrinsic motivation (initiative, persistence, self-direction)
2. Critical thinking skills (problem solving, metacognitive skills, reasoning and judgment skills)
3. Relational skills (communication, cooperation, empathy)
4. Emotional self-regulation (impulse control, stress management, behavior)
5. Self-concept (knowing one's own strengths and limitations, believing in one's ability to succeed, believing that competence grows with effort). (p. 7)<sup>2</sup>

Schools can actively develop students' social emotional skills by:

- (1) Creating an environment where it is safe to express emotions;
- (2) Being emotionally responsive and modeling empathy;
- (3) Setting clear expectations and limits;
- (4) Separating emotions from actions;
- (5) Encouraging and reinforcing social skills such as greeting others and taking turns; and
- (6) Creating opportunities for children to solve problems (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.).

### **Social Emotional Development and Informal Social Interactions**

Newcomers' social emotional development also depends on informal interactions between adults and students and between students and their peers (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

Basic skills that can help students resolve conflicts without adult intervention include the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Stavsky, S. (2015, March). Measuring social and emotional learning with the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO). Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Retrieved from <http://www.niost.org/pdf/MeasuringSELwithSAYO.pdf>

1. Cooling off when upset
2. Speaking directly to each other
3. Speaking assertively, honestly, and kindly
4. Listening carefully to others and accurately paraphrasing their words
5. Proposing solutions and agreeing on a solution to try (Responsive Classroom, n.d.).

### **Social Emotional Well-Being and Bullying**

Bullying is aggressive behavior that is repetitive and that plays upon a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim. “Immigrant bullying” is based on the victim’s immigrant status or family history of immigration, and can take the form of (1) derogatory remarks about a student’s or student’s family members’ immigration status or history, (2) physical violence or threat, (3) manipulation, or (4) shunning (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, n.d.). Newcomers may be bullied due to their race or ethnicity, language, accent, clothing, and religion. Factors such as misinterpreting language and culture, fear of authority figures, and immigration experiences may prevent newcomers from identifying and reporting bullying.

Bullies may be American-born students or other immigrant students who have lived longer in the United States. Newcomers may bully other students in efforts to try to fit in and belong. Factors such as survival skills developed in previous environments, misinterpretation of behavior, and deeply rooted opinions of particular cultural groups may contribute to the bullying (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, n.d.).

The U.S. Department of Education (2015, December 31) suggests that schools use the following strategies to counter bullying:

- Value the diverse linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of all students.
- Encourage students on all sides of an issue to express disagreement over ideas or beliefs in a respectful manner.
- Communicate a clear message to students that harassment and bullying will not be tolerated, and that school is a safe place for all students.
- Create opportunities—for example, by engaging interfaith leaders or campus ministries and others in the school or community—for students to enhance their cultural competency by being exposed to various cultures and faiths, such as through co-curricular activities in which students work on service projects so they discover commonalities and appreciate differences.
- Encourage students, staff, and parents<sup>2</sup> to report all incidents of harassment and bullying so that the school can address them before the situation escalates.
- Have a system in place to intervene if a student’s conduct could endanger others.
- Ensure that information about the steps outlined above is easily understandable for all students, families, and school or college personnel—including those from diverse linguistic backgrounds.