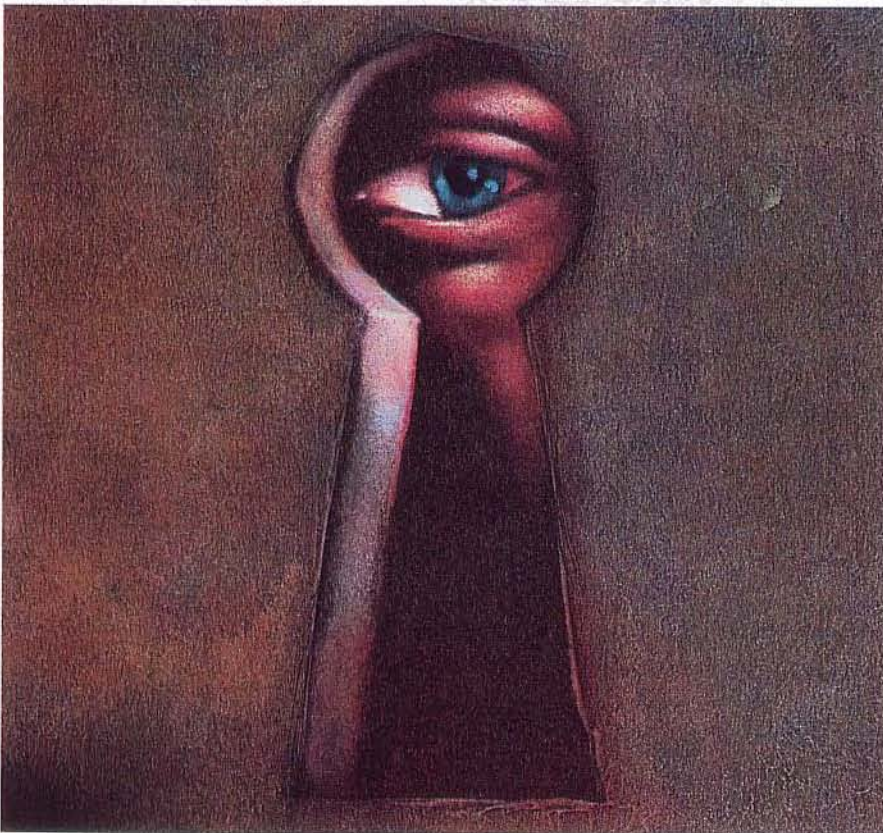


PRINCIPAL

After 9/11: Addressing Children's Fears

Social and emotional learning arms children with "weapons of the spirit" to recognize and combat hate and violence.

LINDA LANTIERI



Through these past months, many of us have had to live with a range of disturbing feelings and haunting images as we integrate the events of September 11th into our minds, hearts, and spirits. For parents and educators, the healing process has been doubly challenging. For even as we struggle to regain our own sense of optimism about the future, our children are counting on us to help them in their struggle. They want to be reassured that they have a safe and secure future.

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How, in the face of these fears and uncertainty, can we make our classrooms fertile ground for convincing children that the future is to be welcomed rather than feared? Pretending that “things are back to normal” won’t do it. We must have the courage and will to translate the shock of this event into an opportunity to reclaim our schools as places that not only attend to children’s test scores but also prepare them for the tests of life.

Schools that were already committed to creating caring and respectful learning environments before September 11th have a head start in creating the kind of climate needed to help children become whole again. Instead of metal detectors and security cameras, these schools have developed a different set of weapons against violence and terrorism—what I call “weapons of the spirit.” They arm children by teaching them to identify and manage their emotions, practice non-violent communication, use relationship-building skills, and appreciate diversity.

By making social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of the curriculum, these schools have found a comprehensive and coordinated way to address the deeply intertwined academic, social, and emotional needs of students, as well as the near-overwhelming demands on teachers’ time and talents.

Creating Peaceable Classrooms

Comprehensive SEL programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges from supportive and challenging relationships, and that developing and bolstering student strengths—and preventing problems such as violence, drug abuse, or trauma—is most effective when multi-year integrated efforts develop children’s social and emotional abilities. Comprehensive SEL programs begin in the primary grades and continue in a developmentally appropriate sequence through high school.

What are children learning in classrooms where SEL programming has

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After 9/11: What Schools Can Do

- Provide forums for children to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and ask questions.
- Encourage thoughtful dialogue and multiple perspectives on controversial issues.
- Teach children to recognize and counter prejudice and discrimination.
- Provide opportunities for students to practice democracy.
- Develop clear structures and procedures for responding to crises such as 9/11.
- Reexamine your mission statement and let it reflect a commitment to social and emotional learning, social responsibility, and active citizenship.

taken root—especially as it relates to events such as September 11th?

They are learning that when conflict escalates on the playground, there are many options for resolution, including finding a mediator. They see that retaliation usually leads to the other person becoming angrier and striking back, further escalating the

situation. They explore the difference between justice and retaliation, and observe how emotions such as anger and even rage can be channeled into constructive action.

Students also learn about the healing power of love, respect, and understanding. They learn that violence is often rooted in poverty and inequality, and how to recognize stereotyping, scapegoating, bias, and discrimination. They learn to celebrate and respect diversity.

To integrate SEL, which is dedicated to the proposition that the best we can do to protect children in these challenging times is to support their full growth and development, requires strong, informed, and visionary leadership.

A World Without Fear

I, for one, will continue to work for a world where children’s thoughts and feelings are heard; a world in which thoughtful dialogue about complex and controversial issues is always welcome; a world in which prejudice, discrimination, and hatred have no place; and a world in which there are many opportunities for children to engage and actively participate in our democratic processes.

The best way to address children’s fears after September 11th would be to commit our schools to a vision of education that nurtures not only children’s minds, but their hearts and spirits as well. □

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994 to address the needs of educators seeking to implement or enhance social and emotional learning in their schools. Log on to its Web site, www.casel.org, for a listing of resources for handling trauma and crises, or to sign up for one of its three electronic mailing lists.

For helpful teaching strategies, log on to the Web site of Educators for Social Responsibility, www.esrnational.org.