

Supportive Social Learning: Creating Classroom Communities that Care

Ellen Hall & Jennifer Kofkin Rudkin

The theory and practice of Supportive Social Learning (SSL) developed in response to a common classroom dilemma. How can the inevitable challenges that arise when people come together in groups serve as an opportunity for learning rather than a source of contention? How do we resolve interpersonal difficulties without resorting to punitive practices that disrupt relationships? Can we ground lessons in getting along in a desire to create compassionate communities rather than compliant individuals?

SSL can be difficult to convey because it is a state of mind rather than a technique. Let's ground the discussion in an example. Several years ago, a teacher at Make a Mess and Make Believe School (MAM) was trying to read a story to her class of two- to two-and-one-half-year olds. One of the children, an extremely sensitive boy who expressed his discomfort in disruptive ways, was making story time impossible. An associate teacher sat next to the boy, rubbing his back and talking to him quietly, but the boy continued to cause chaos.

It would have been easy for the teacher to stop the story and ask the associate to take the child from the room. This is not, however, what she did. When it became clear that the boy would not be calmed, the teacher stopped reading and closed the book. She said to the children, "Our friend seems to be having a hard day. How can we help him?" One after another, children went to their cubbies to retrieve something the boy might like—a favorite stuffed animal, his blanket, a pillow. The boy accepted these gifts, quieted, and rejoined the community. Ellen Hall, Director of MAM, witnessed this incident and recounts, "The teacher found a way to turn what could have been a tense and explosive situation into an invaluable opportunity to model SSL for the child, for his classmates, and for me, the school's Director."

Defining Features of SSL

SSL developed as an alternative approach to discipline but is not primarily about discipline at all; it reflects a general orientation to the classroom. Four components define SSL: 1) The teacher appreciates all perspectives in the classroom and includes everyone in creating a sense of community; 2) Relationships-in-community take precedence over other agendas; 3) The teacher sees the children as capable of overcoming problems and being socially successful, individually and as a group; and 4) The teacher enters interactions with a questioning posture and commitment to conversation.

- 1) *The teacher appreciates all perspectives in the classroom and includes everyone in creating a sense of community.*

SSL requires empathy and perspective taking. Teachers ask themselves, “How would I want to be treated if I were that person?” and consider the viewpoints of all the children.

When one child acts out against another, it can be tempting to assign blame and interact with the children not as unique individuals but in their roles as “victims” or “perpetrators.” This often entails a focus on the feelings of the “victim.” The feelings of the “perpetrator” may not be similarly honored. In SSL, teachers recognize that the child who acts out is hurting as well. MAM teachers talk of the “two-armed hug,” a hug that embraces “victims” and “perpetrators” alike.

Too often, efforts to hold a misbehaving child accountable for his or her actions alienate that child from the social group. “You go stand in the corner,” or “You stay in the classroom during recess.” In more extreme cases, children may be suspended or even expelled. These practices may exacerbate problems. For example, conflicts often occur when a child attempts to enter a social group. If a teacher intervenes by removing either the child seeking to enter the group or a child who rejects these advances, this does not help and likely hinders the children’s ability to negotiate such situations more effectively in the future.

Teachers are not the only ones who respond to social transgressions with attempts to isolate the child perceived as problematic. Parents may warn their own children not to play with or talk to another child who has hit or been deemed in some way offensive. Children also scapegoat and reject each other. In SSL, teachers attempt to keep children together in community. The goal is for members of the classroom to work with each other, not against each other.

An unwillingness to condemn children does *not* mean that all behaviors are viewed as acceptable. A child who acts against another is held responsible for righting the wrong, but this is done in a way that brings the children together. In a situation where one child pushes another, for example, the teacher might say to the aggressor, “When you knocked this child down he hurt his knee and that made him cry. Would you like to help get some ice for that sore knee?”

Perhaps the biggest misconception about SSL is that it is synonymous with permissiveness. Quite the contrary. Environments that are physically unsafe and characterized by disrespectful interactions undermine supportive social learning... and learning more generally.

SSL requires honoring the perspectives of transgressors. In addition, teachers must attend to class members who were not directly involved in the incident. Any event in the classroom involves not only the main protagonists; other class members participate as witnesses.

Being singled out for sanction in front of one's peers serves to silence, isolate, and wound the transgressor. It is not, however, simply an interaction between someone who transgresses and someone who punishes. It also involves people in the role of the witness.

Although dunce caps may be relics of the past, classroom humiliation remains a common occurrence. In one study, beginning teachers were asked to reflect on their worst school experiences. Most did not recount instances of school failure, but related painful scenes of humiliation. One described having a paper read out loud by the teacher as an example of poor work. Another recalled having tape placed over his or her mouth as punishment for talking out of turn. Although little has been written about humiliation in the education literature, it appears to be a common and powerful classroom occurrence.

When witnesses stand idly by, as they often must when they are in less powerful social positions, they become complicit in the act of humiliation. This sabotages relationships of solidarity that are at the heart of SSL. Humiliation promotes distance among the humiliated child and her or his peers, and between the teacher and all class members.

Teachers may seek to make an example of the offending child.: "Watch—if you act out in this way, this is how you will suffer as well." When MAM teachers deal with social transgressions, they seek to send a decidedly different message: "Watch— if you act out, see how you will be supported, too."

Children observe how incidents are dealt with in the classroom in an effort to assess the ramifications for themselves. They assess whether it is safe to have a bad day or make a mistake in their environment. Some children, particularly children accustomed to more punitive approaches in other settings, may find it difficult to trust the safety of a SSL classroom, and may initially test the teachers' limits. This makes the compassionate handling of challenging social situations all the more important. Children need to know that they are not out there on their own; their teachers, their peers, and the classroom community as a whole can be counted on in difficult times.

2) *Relationships-in-community take precedence over other agendas.*

As witnesses, children learn whether they are in a place of safety, or a place of danger. They can be made complicit in acts of humiliation, or in the creation of a caring community. They develop expectations about how they will be treated, and also learn how to treat others who are sad or angry or hurt.

It has been clear, at least since Albert Bandura's classic research on social learning, that children model their own behaviors after those around them. Thus, SSL requires a commitment to empathic and respectful relationships at every level— children to children, children to teachers, teachers to children, teachers to teachers, administrators to teachers, and so on.

A commitment to fostering socially supportive relationships requires a reordering of priorities. This may mean dispensing with one's agenda. In the opening example, removal of the disruptive child would have allowed story time to proceed. If the teacher located the important learning of the day in the reading of the book, removal would seem a logical solution. It would not, however, have promoted SSL. At MAM SSL is *the* priority.

A commitment to fostering socially supportive relationships also requires a willingness to take the necessary time. In the short-term, SSL is not always the easiest way. It may seem easier to remove a disruptive child than to find a way to bring him back into the classroom fold. It may seem easier to scream "no, I don't ever want to see you do that again" at a child who has just pushed a classmate to the floor rather than to comfort both the pushed and the pusher, and bring them back into relationship with each other. MAM staff believes, however, that the time taken to create a supportive social environment will pay off in the long-term. Not only are they creating a classroom in which children feel a part of a community, they are creating a community in which learning can flourish.

Learning takes place in the context of relationships. When relationships are supportive, children are able to demonstrate their intelligence, creativity, and problem solving abilities.

3) The teacher sees the children as capable of overcoming problems and being socially successful, individually and as a group.

Social expectations are often fulfilled, regardless of the merits of their foundation. We now know that tracking and labeling children can create self-fulfilling prophecies. People respond to the perceived deficits of others in ways that actualize and exacerbate them. On the other hand, when we expect the best, we allow others to prove themselves capable.

MAM has been studying the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education for many years. Educators in Reggio Emilia speak of the "image of the child." The relationships we form flow from the images we hold of each other. If we see children as capable, resourceful, and well meaning, we respond in ways that make such behaviors possible.

Expecting the best does not mean having blinders to problems. It does mean opting for perspectives that are both truthful and favorable. The amount of water in a glass may be indisputable, but we can choose to see the glass as half empty or half full. In practicing SSL, teachers actively try to learn as much as possible about the reality of the children, but cast what they learn in the best possible light.

This means resisting tendencies to explain children's behaviors in terms of individual deficits. Teachers avoid labels such as "mean" or "selfish" and refuse to locate problems solely within individuals. They search instead for obstacles to competent behavior, such as classroom dynamics. Consider, for example, a child who is rejected by classmates.

Unpopularity may result not from the child's social skill deficits, but from biases in classmates. Thus, interventions directed at the individual child might have limited results.

When a MAM teacher observed that a child in her classroom had become ostracized, the staff devised a plan. The schedule of a teacher widely perceived by the students as "Mr. Cool" was cleared so that he could visit with the socially isolated child for an hour each morning. When classmates attempted to draw the revered teacher away, he proclaimed his desire to play with the isolated child, and invited the others to join them instead. Gradually, the classmates began to play with the previously alienated child, first when the esteemed teacher was present, and later at other times throughout the day.

The focus of SSL is not how to change problem behavior, but how best to create the conditions that make competent behavior possible. This means attending to classroom dynamics. It also directs attention to the physical environment. If there is not enough space in the room, or enough toys to share, or if the room is too loud or too busy, frustrations and hostile interactions become more likely.

In SSL, opportunities for constructive involvement with others are created, and the assumption maintained that *all* people are capable of overcoming problems and being socially successful. When one child hurts another, he or she is invited to help get ice. When one child is having a difficult day and acting disruptively, others are invited to help the struggling child feel better.

Not every invitation is accepted every time, but children are always given a chance to rise to the occasion. The door to prosocial behavior is kept open.

4) *The teacher enters interactions with a questioning posture and commitment to conversation.*

SSL is not prescriptive. Everyday classroom routines are infinitely varied, challenging situations can be resolved in a myriad ways, and each child takes something different from every encounter. Thus, SSL requires teachers to enter situations with an open, questioning attitude and an eagerness to engage in honest and authentic communication.

This communication has many facets. First and foremost is the importance of listening to children. *Voice* is an important metaphor for power. In our society, not everyone has an equal voice, and children are a silenced group. According to one popular saying, "Children should be seen and not heard."

The lower social status of children is one reason why their voices may not be honored. A second reason relates to language abilities. It requires *time* to understand people who do not speak well, be they foreigners, stroke victims, or young children. It is much easier to dismiss the insights of people who lack language skills and speak *over* them or *for* them rather than *with* them. At MAM, teachers emphasize listening and place a high priority

on helping children to articulate their social feelings. When children can make themselves understood, they need not resort to pushing or yelling. MAM teachers have developed their own language to facilitate early understanding of important concepts. Even young children assert “my space” or understand the need to touch each other with “soft hands” or say to each other, “I need a hug.”

In structuring opportunities where children can succeed, it is important to consider developmental capabilities. Language ability is one example. As another, toddlers may find sharing a toy *immensely* challenging. Tempering one’s expectations with a knowledge of child development does not mean being ruled by this knowledge, however. Very young children who have experienced SSL on an ongoing basis show surprising abilities to communicate their own needs, understand their classmate’s perspectives, and help create a supportive classroom community.

In SSL, teachers model and scaffold a process for taking care of problems in the classroom. They convey the notion that problems are everyone’s responsibility, and that everyone is competent to resolve them.

One day, about a year after the scene described in the opening example, the same teacher found herself once again trying to reassure and comfort the same little boy who was once again having a hard day. She had tried several strategies that had been effective in the past, to no avail. She was at a loss. As she sat with him in the rocking chair, another child came over and silently handed them a book. It was the little boy’s favorite book. The teacher began to read. The boy became calm.