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# Back to School: Balancing Academic and Social-Emotional Wellness

**Cindy Lopez:**

*Welcome. My name is Cindy Lopez, the host of this CHC podcast, Voices of Compassion. We hope you find a little courage, feel connected and experience compassion every time you listen.*

Social emotional wellbeing is fundamental to life and learning. As we start the new school year, we're mindful of all that we've been through in the past couple of years. We've learned that our students' social and emotional health is as important or even more important than academic learning. So how can parents help to prioritize their child's emotional and social health as we go back to school? Listen to this timely episode with Chris Harris, CHC's Chief Education Officer as we talk about social emotional wellness questions, parents can ask teachers about this and strategies to build social emotional health in kids. Welcome Chris.

**Chris Harris:**

Nice to be here, Cindy. Thanks for having me back. This is a great topic early in the year. I'm looking forward to answering questions. I have been in many fall IEPs and parent uh conferences uh both in the public school and the private and the independent school sector. So I'm looking forward to talking to you all today.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Thanks, Chris. And this topic is as you've already noted so timely, especially as we look at the past couple of years and what we've been through with COVID and distance learning, virtual learning, mental health and the social emotional wellbeing of our kids has now really taken front seat. Why do you think that is? And can you define what we're talking about when we are talking about social emotional wellness?

**Chris Harris:**

It is so important. And, you know, actually it was called character curriculum back in the 1960s when professionals recognized that the wellbeing of a child is actually a social and emotional component. And without those two being at equilibrium or healthy wise, it's pretty hard to be concentrating on academics. And so this is why I think especially at

the outset of the school year we're encouraging educators and parents to focus their questions and their interactions on the social emotional wellbeing of youngsters uh and less so in the academics because really there's the idea of kids having solid and stable and predictable relationships with both their teacher and the peers in their classroom, that they feel safe in a classroom, that they feel like they can trust their peers and their teacher is all a prerequisite to clearing the mind enough to now do the cognitive work of the academic learning. And so that's why it's so important and during this podcast we'll talk about some of the questions that parents can ask to actually ascertain the wellbeing of their youngster in the class for right now.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah. And so that social emotional wellness and so Casel for all of our listeners, [casel.org](http://casel.org) is a good resource for you. We'll have it listed in the resources on our webpages at [casel.org](http://casel.org), and they define social emotional wellbeing, social emotional learning as a person's ability to understand and manage their emotions, to make responsible decisions, to build and maintain relationships and to understand and empathize with others. So it encompasses a lot. And as you just said Chris, it's really important. And I also really appreciate the fact that you brought up like when kids feel safe and that includes like physically and emotionally safe in their setting, that's when they start to take risks and that's when learning can happen. So it's really, as you already noted, a precursor, social emotional wellbeing is really foundational to cognitive learning.

**Chris Harris:**

Sure is, one of the things that I love about the social emotional learning too is its progression. So one of the things that I love is starting with the youngster themselves and helping them increase their self-awareness, which doesn't necessarily mean all the problems or all the challenges they're facing. It means helping the youngster see the balance of their talents and attributes with some of the challenges they're facing and being realistic about that and then nurturing those talents and attributes. And then moving on to social awareness, like how do you know when somebody's really interested in what I'm saying or how do I inject myself into a peer group so that I can partake with them and learning all of those nonverbal and subtle interactional skills that allow kids to actually be in part of a relationship and part of a peer group. And then of course moving on at the higher levels, this isn't just an elementary school issue in moving into middle and high school, the idea of social cognition and including the, what is empathy and what is perspective taking because those are two incredibly important components that allow youngsters to sustain those relationships. And again, I just wanna go into the fact that we as parents and educators can find this information out from kids, if we ask the right questions. And so as we go on Cindy, we'll get a chance to

do that because these are the foundational components that allow kids to optimize their learning opportunities in the classroom.

**Cindy Lopez:**

I did some reading and I came across a national PTA survey. I think it was from June 2022 and what I found as parents are starting to think about their kids going back to school this fall, that survey found that parents reported bullying and violence, like they were more concerned about those things than COVID concerns. And so that also really points back to social emotional wellbeing. How can kids really be prepared for those kinds of things as they go back to school?

**Chris Harris:**

Instead of the ABCs of social emotional learning, I've put together the RSTs, and I've kind of mentioned them already. So the RST is relationship building and sustainability, safety, emotionally and physically and trust of their peers and their teachers. Trust is really a fundamental thing here, and I think it's been overlooked in the whole social emotional wellbeing.

**Cindy Lopez:**

So how can parents effectively support their kids as they're back in school, especially in these early months of the school year?

**Chris Harris:**

Well, so by the time this podcast comes live most of the parents out on the West Coast are gonna have their kids back in school, but there's a really key night that comes up very quickly in the school year and that is back to school night. So I'm gonna divide this sort of into two sections: your discussion with your youngsters and then getting ready for back to school night.

So let's start with the youngsters that you have, and I know that typically when a youngster gets home from school, somebody says, "how's your day today?," as they're chomping down some kind of snack and they, "Oh, just fine. It was okay," or whatever, and out the door they go and that's your information. So I'm really gonna encourage parents in this year where there is uncertainty with COVID and all the things going on in the outside society to be more direct about some of the questions that you're asking and make them really related to relationships. Your youngster should be able to talk to you about the names of friends that they have and what they're doing, and so you really wanna ascertain, who are you playing with? Who are you sitting with in the cafeteria? Who's riding the bus with you? Who's your partner in social studies, you know, and if you're not getting names that could be an indication of that youngster

feeling somewhat isolated and/or neglected by a peer group. And that's a yellow flag everybody because again, that's a fundamental, foundational component to being well enough to learn. And if you're not hearing about friends by name there's a chance that your youngster may be experiencing some ignoring or rejection or neglecting. And you wanna kind of follow up with a teacher and give them a heads up that you're concerned about that and you'd like some feedback about how they're interacting in school. So that's a really important one.

Number two is the youngster hopefully will talk a little bit about what the teacher's doing in terms of social emotional wellbeing. So did you have a class meeting in the morning? Did the teacher do a check in with everybody? Did you do some activity that was nonacademic in the classroom? And of course this gets a little bit more complicated as you go through middle school and high school, but again, a teacher who's recognizing the foundational essentialness of social emotional wellbeing will make sure that the kids feel welcomed into the classroom before they actually plunge into academics, and I think that's something that you wanna hear from your youngsters, did you get greeted by Mr. Jones? Ms. Smith, did she give you some kind of opportunity to share a little bit about what's going on in everybody's life at some point during the week? So these are also things that I think, you know, if you don't hear it, if it's all academics again, I think that's pushing it too hard and not making sure that the youngsters optimally available for instruction. And I think that's a missed opportunity for a teacher and it may be something that you want to talk to the teacher individually about.

**Cindy Lopez:**

So, you just referenced middle school and high school. I'm wondering if you have some specific examples or talk tracks you might share with our listeners as they are talking with their kids or their teachers in elementary school, middle school and high school?

**Chris Harris:**

I do think that regardless of whether the youngster is in elementary school or a senior in high school, that checking in with your youngster and hearing names of friends and hearing the names of the teachers actually is really an important thing. If they're not talking in specificities, they may best be trying to suck it up or, you know, whether the storm or they're disengaged and all of those situations is not how you wanna start the school year. So I think parents you need to hear names and you need to hear specific activities that relate to that person's name, whether it's being on the bus, whether it's Mr. Jones teaching a history lesson that was kind of interesting or totally boring. It doesn't matter, what you want is some specifics about people and activities. And, and so, "oh, school is okay" isn't enough right now because really we gotta address the social emotional wellbeing and the way to do it is ask a little bit more specific questions that

are gonna elicit some information that you'll feel better about knowing, or know that it's time to maybe correspond with a teacher or a counselor about youngsters and you're concern about their being neglected or rejected or not feeling a part of the school community.

**Mike:**

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**Cindy Lopez:**

I'm wondering if you can talk about what you think is most important in terms of parents. You mentioned the RSTs, maybe talk about those a little bit more and talk about any specific strategies you can share with parents.

**Chris Harris:**

So let me start with some easy symptoms that we'll tell you things probably aren't going the way you want it or the way the youngster wants it, and they're pretty evident at home. So the first one and the most obvious one is if your youngster starts complaining about headaches and stomachaches and not feeling well and really feeling pretty lethargic, really not getting out of bed in the morning. There's probably some psychological components to that. And that's probably due to the fact that they're spending at least 30 hours outside of your home at school and kids who are not feeling a part of a community, who don't feel like they have stable and predictable relationships, where they are feeling unsafe because maybe there's bullying going on, where they don't trust the teacher because whatever kind of interaction was unfortunate. Those are the youngsters that are gonna start showing you resistance in going to school, lethargy, they're going to maybe show somatizing, headaches, stomachaches. They're gonna seem pretty disengaged. And they're probably not gonna wanna engage with much conversation with you, which is why checking out when they are disengaged and not conversational with you at all, and I'm not talking about a 30-minute debrief of the school, but the specificity of people and activities that can be done easily in like 5 to 10 minutes will reassure you that there's connectedness going on. As opposed to I can't talk about any names, and I'm not talking about any activities and that's a sign to me of disengagement, like I'm not really feeling part of anything and that should be a concern to you and something that you may wanna follow up with somebody at school on.

Going back to the relationships and the safety and the trust — these are all basic factors. And while I would have to say that they're somewhat eclectic and esoteric, uh, abstract, you can get those into concrete, like who are you playing with? Who are you

sitting with in the cafeteria? Safety wise, are people wearing masks you know, is everybody accepting of that? Do you see anybody bullying or is anybody being teased that you can see and trust is a matter of, “is your teacher interacting with you in some kind of supportive manner?” Or is the interaction mostly disciplinary as they try to get the class under control. And I know principals today, that’s certainly true with the principals I know, are looking for positive behavior support ways to do it as opposed to reactive disciplinary measures. So this is stuff that you can find out from your youngster early on, and then we’ll get into back to school night and you can begin to get a little bit more specific and make sure that the educational setting that your youngster’s in is adding a conducive learning environment for the majority of the school year.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah, so, so helpful. A couple other strategies that I think about in terms of my own experience in schools and teaching and in being an administrator is for parents at home, be present with your child. And I think that’s what Chris was just saying, ask questions, be intentional about connecting with your child and figure out regular ways to do that and whatever makes sense. If it’s a younger child, you know, reading a book together, if it’s your middle schooler or high schooler, so many times parents say the best time for me to talk with my teen is when we’re in the car going somewhere, right?

And also kind of the next step beyond what Chris has been talking about, empowering your child to solve their own problems, like help them think through that and think about if they’re having issues with friends at school or whatever, instead of telling them what to do, like sit down and listen and figure out what the problem is and then empower them to solve problems. For parents these are a lot of things that you already do. So we’re just affirming like keep on doing those things or start doing them if you haven’t been.

Chris, you already mentioned how fundamental social emotional wellbeing is to academic success. How do we, in reality, prioritize that both in the school and how do parents kind of reinforce that at home?

**Chris Harris:**

So let’s think about the type of question that the parent is asking. Instead of saying, “what did you get on the test?,” they’re asking very different kinds of questions. and by asking different kinds of questions, more around social emotional, you’re actually implicitly stating the priority for your youngster at that point in time, okay, and that’s really important. So if after the first week the parent starts asking, “how much homework do you have? Are you ready to sit down and do it?,” that’s neglecting the social emotional component, and after a week of school maybe they’re not quite ready to plunge into that kind of intensity of academia quite yet. So I think that’s why the

questioning is so important in terms of bringing your child into what's important to the parent as well as what the parent is most caring about with their youngster at this particular time.

Now, hopefully what happens is all this gets resolved and the kids get into the routine of school. And I wanna mention here today too that it's always a great thing if parents can also swing back into from the vacation lack of routine, usually cuz there's a little more spontaneity into a routine that's predictable and consistent for the youngsters as well because if they have routines both at school and at home that they've internalized you're reducing the emotional fear that comes from the unknown especially today when we see so much in society that's disturbing to us. So that routine and that predictability elevates the safety component of the RST. It absolutely does. When kids don't have to think about what's coming next they are a little less anxious and feeling more secure in the environment that's giving them that consistent and predictable routine.

Now let's get into back to school night just a little bit. And you gotta be careful parents about being even confrontational I think with teachers, you wanna be supportive of them. So the kinds of questions you might ask are simple things like, "do you hold a class meeting where kids can share you know concerns that they may have or do you finish the week with accolades, identifying youngsters who have done some great accomplishments and help youngsters complement other youngsters in the class." So you're building that community, having the questions deal more around the social component of the classroom as opposed to what's the curriculum going to be and what chapter will you be on by October 1st, again, when parents do that they're setting the priority of concern that they have for the teacher, which will help them actually spend some time on the social emotional wellbeing of the youngsters. If all the questions that come from back to school night are academically based then the teacher's going to feel sort of the pressure or the stress of saying, "okay, I've gotta be pretty strictly academic." If you mix questions in that have to do with building that classroom community, building the social relationships, making sure that the environment is feeling safe and free of bullying and teasing you're also stating what the priority is for you at this time of the year and that's going to relay to the teacher. So I think you can be tremendously helpful in prioritizing what happens in a classroom by asking supportive positive questions that deal with social emotional wellbeing.

**Cindy Lopez:**

So our kids have always been consumers of media and technology, right? They're on their devices all the time and that's how they are growing up and how they take in a lot of information from the world around them. So let's talk about that for just a second.

What's your advice for parents about the role of media and technology in the lives of our students?

**Chris Harris:**

Let's relate it to social emotional wellbeing. So and here again, parent observation skills are really key in terms of, you know, whether or not the social media is being a positive influencer or a harmful one. So we know that bullying can go on in social media. So if your youngster is actually hiding and disengaging from the family and retreating, you need to find out why because probably the correspondences are not building that youngster self-esteem, it's not building their positive self-image. If there's something going on that either is creating a sense of either not healthy dependency or that there's a rejection or an issue or a problem that is not getting resolved well, and it's perpetuating itself on social media and so I think you wanna be careful about that if your youngster is ebullient, happy, coming down to dinner, talkative, if they are, engaged in conversation with you, then social media is not playing any negative component in, but if you see behavioral changes don't just dismiss them. You need to find out because it could be coming through social media.

With everything going on in the world today there's a balance between providing your youngster with just enough to keep them knowledgeable and understanding that our society is going through some changes and some transformation and some hardship right now and inundating them with that and having the news on all day and having it in the next room going on and on and on is probably not going to help them put a balance into it. As parents you wanna create a feeling of hopefulness, of optimism, of positivity for the youngster as they move forward in this school year. And so if there's influences that are counteracting that you wanna limit those because again this comes back to safety. The safer youngsters feel the more they can trust you to take care of them and build their attributes and talents and nurture their strengths, the better they're going to be. And so you wanna set an environment that's gonna do everything it can to perpetuate that positivity, and so that's not to say that you eliminate all the hardships that are going on, but you don't wanna see your youngster begin to deteriorate emotionally. You don't wanna see them become negative because of the media that's going on around them. And I think it's pretty easy to observe when kids are retreating, withdrawing. They're not conversational anymore. They're not looking happy. And again you could see the somatization, you could see heightened anxiety, you could see resistance to going to school. Those are yellow flags and you need to take them seriously and dig deeper and find out the source of those kinds of issues.

**Cindy Lopez:**

Yeah, it's so important to think about kids' consumption of media and technology. And

parents, you model for them too. If you have your phone in your hand or your device in your hand pretty much a hundred percent of the time and it's at the dinner table with you, you know, while you're having a conversation with your child, it's interrupting you, like, think about those kinds of things, too, model that for your kids, put your phone down, put it away, mute it, whatever it is. Chris, really appreciate all your thoughts and your expertise sharing with us today. And as we wrap up and think about what you've said, what do you really want our listeners to remember from this episode?

**Chris Harris:**

I'd like to go back to just the ABCs or in this case, the RSTs of getting started in the school year and emphasizing the importance of relationship building and feeling a part of a community, really feeling like you're part of something, safety is, that's physical and emotional and then finally T is trust and being able to honestly and genuinely trust the peers that you have with you and being able to trust the teachers and the educators who are taking care of them during the day and you know, just very quickly on the trust too, is trust involves social media, and that tool that kids carry around, that iPhone that they're carrying around is the difference between trusting somebody and betraying trust in somebody, and I'm gonna be really candid about that. It is the instrument that can betray trust with just an email, just a text or just a video. And we need to be very diligent about that because once trust is broken, it is very hard to bring it back. So I encourage everybody to think about the RSTs and to do everything you can to make sure that those three things happen because your youngster will have a much more successful academic year if those three things are in place.

**Cindy Lopez:**

So, Chris, thank you so much for joining us and to our listeners for joining us today and to our listeners if there's something going on with your child where you're thinking you need some additional help, please reach out. CHC is here for you. We have many specialists who work with kids and families, and you can find out more at [chconline.org](http://chconline.org). You can reach our care team at 650-688-3625. Please reach out, and we'd love to hear from you. So thank you again for joining us and thank you, Chris.

**Chris Harris:**

Thank you.