

Social emotional learning is key

When parents think about keeping their children healthy, most of us go directly to the physical health of our kids. We think about the tangible items in their lives: the food they eat, what they read, their time in front of a screen and how they exercise.

Allow me to change the axis for this review. Let me adjust the perspective to your child's intangible health: those items we cannot easily see or define.

The role of the Robert Crown Center for Health Education is primary prevention. We educate students about the physical, "tangible" attributes and characteristics of their bodies in scientific terms that peak their interest and provide the stage to answer their varied questions. We also seek to educate these young people about their "intangible" skills. In education parlance, this is termed social emotional learning.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning, which is based in Chicago, defines SEL as the process through which children acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

We agree with CASEL as they shine the light on this important piece to our children's growth and development. A healthy, happy student tends to do better in school because they are able to focus their energies on their schoolwork. Unfortunately, the world in which our children reside is much more complex and challenging than the world many of us resided in as adolescents.

Young people are bombarded with harmful expect-



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tations of how they should look, feel and behave. The good news is they can be taught skills for building self-esteem, creating and enforcing positive body image and appreciation for individuality, while incorporating strategies for combating bullying.

Additionally, it is helpful for students to explore factors that influence their perceptions of themselves: cultural expectations, social interactions, peer pressure and media images while also exploring the qualities of healthy relationships.

Young people also need to "test drive" these skills through role play and real-life scenarios, which they do at RCC. Students' takeaways from this work include: understanding the factors that make us who we are and how these factors influence our interactions with others; accepting that we should consider the effect of our actions on others when making decisions; skills to make choices that positively affect our physical and emotional health; and tools to cope with stressors, including peer pressure and media pressure.

As I mentioned previously, our work is primary prevention. We plant seeds with students in hopes that these skills will be nourished as they grow and mature so that they are prepared when faced with pressures and difficult decisions. If our young people understand their context, have the skills to recognize potential options and the fortitude to make the right decision, the RCC mission to educate and motivate young people to lead healthy, happy and safe lives will be fulfilled, and our job as parents will be complete.

— R.J. McMahon is the chief executive officer of the Robert Crown Centers for Health Education, based in Hinsdale.