



Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

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FAQ: The 4Rs and Social & Emotional Learning

What is The 4Rs?

The 4Rs Program (Reading Writing, Respect & Resolution) is a classroom-based program that integrates social and emotional learning into language arts for pre-kindergarten to middle school. Through the program, Morningside Center provides training and classroom coaching to prepare teachers to teach weekly lessons based on The 4Rs curriculum.

The 4Rs uses high-quality children's literature and engaging interactive activities to develop students' skills and understanding in seven areas: building community, understanding and handling feelings, listening, assertiveness, problem-solving, dealing well with diversity, and cooperation. The 4Rs curriculum is grade-specific: Each grade has its own teaching guide, books, and age-appropriate activities.

The 4Rs fosters students' social and emotional learning (SEL), helping them develop skills they can use for the rest of their lives. The 4Rs also gives teachers and students tools for creating a caring, respectful climate for learning in the classroom.

What is “social and emotional learning”?

It's the process by which we develop our emotional intelligence. It consists of:

- understanding and managing feelings
- relating well to others
- dealing well with conflict and other life challenges
- focusing attention and concentrating
- setting goals and working toward them
- making good decisions
- taking responsibility for improving our communities – the classroom, the neighborhood, the world

What need does it serve?

Young people come to school with a lot on their minds – problems, worries, conflicts – that can get in the way of the learning. Through a curriculum that fosters social and emotional learning, kids learn skills to help them deal with their feelings and relationships so that they have more attention for learning.

SEL also helps teachers establish a good atmosphere for learning in the classroom. We give teachers skills and specific tools they can use to address behavioral issues in a positive way. Teachers turn their classroom into a caring community instead of a chaotic place where it's hard for kids to learn.

On a school-wide level: Schools can be a very hard place for kids—in many schools, there's a lot of teasing, bullying and fighting. With a program that fosters social and emotional learning, the adults enlist the support of kids and the entire school community in creating a positive, respectful environment throughout the school.

Kids get messages about social and emotional matters every day—in school, at home, in the media. These messages are haphazard, sometimes negative, and often contradictory. We wouldn't teach math or reading in such a haphazard way. Social and emotional skills are so important that we need to use consistent, research-based approaches to teaching them. That's what evidence-based SEL programs do.

Are you asking teachers to be therapists? Or parents?

No, we're asking teachers to teach kids ideas and skills using a curriculum that has been shown to improve students' behavior, their social competency, and their academic performance. Kids learn specific skills—like how to be a good listener, how to be assertive (strong, not mean), how to solve problems through negotiation, and how to deal well with issues of diversity. These are skills that everyone needs to have to do well in school, at home, in the workplace, and in a democratic society. And they can be taught.

Why should SEL be part of education? Shouldn't the focus be on academics?

We know—through both research and common sense—that emotional intelligence is as important as academic skills for success in life. What's more, social and emotional skills have become increasingly important in the global economy: Employers are looking for people who can work well with others, including those from different backgrounds, and solve problems collaboratively and creatively.

Research also shows that we don't have to choose between improving students' academic performance and building their social and emotional skills. A recent meta-analysis of studies of SEL programs just published in the journal *Child Development* found that kids in SEL programs had better attendance, better behavior, better grades—and did significantly better on standardized tests—than kids who were not in SEL programs. A research study of our own 4Rs Program found the same thing.

What does SEL look like in a school? What do you do, exactly?

- 1) Teachers teach an SEL curriculum. In our 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution), teachers teach at least one lesson a week throughout the year.
- 2) The school adopts an approach to discipline that fosters social and emotional learning, and an atmosphere of respect among adults, between adults and children and between children. This includes strong action to eliminate bullying and create a caring community.
- 3) Students have opportunities to become leaders and help develop a positive peer culture. For instance, we train and coach students in grades 3-8 to be peer mediators: Students learn a specific set of mediation steps, and then work in teams to resolve conflicts that come up among their peers, with support from an adult mediation coach. We train even younger children to be peace helpers in their classroom, with the teacher's support.
- 4) The school continually hones its curriculum, its policies, and its practices to ensure respect for all.
- 5) The school is a learning organization based on inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and collegiality.
- 6) The school engages parents in activities aimed at developing their social and emotional skills.

Does this really work? How do you assess the effectiveness of a program like this?

There is a large body of scientific evidence that high-quality social and emotional learning programs have a positive effect on children's behavior, their social and emotional competency, and their academic performance.

For instance, our 4Rs Program is the subject of a gold-standard study by top researchers at New York University, Fordham University, and Harvard University. For three years, the researchers tracked the development of students in nine New York City public elementary schools that implemented The 4Rs schoolwide compared to students in nine control schools. Researchers have begun publishing their findings for years one and two in peer-review journals.

Children in the 4Rs schools showed:

- lower rates of depression and hostile attribution bias (the tendency to ascribe hostile motives to others in ambiguous social situations) than children in the control schools
- a decline in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms during the year compared to increases among children in control schools
- an increase in social competence, compared to a decline among children in the control schools

Compared to their counterparts in control schools, children in 4Rs schools who were judged by their teachers at the start of the study to be at greatest behavioral risk showed significantly greater improvement in:

- Attendance
- Academic skills, as reported by their teachers
- Scores on standardized reading and math achievement tests

In addition, independent (“blind”) observers found significantly higher levels of overall classroom quality among classrooms in the 4Rs schools compared to classrooms in the control schools—findings that are correlated with improved academic performance.

After collaborating with top researchers on two multi-year, federally funded studies of our programs, we know how important good data, good data collection systems, and insightful analysis of data are in assessing the effectiveness of our work. We have used this information to continually improve the quality of our programs. We are always looking for practical, low-cost ways to effectively assess our work at every school -- not just in schools where we have major research programs underway.

For instance, in our anti-bullying programs at some schools, we have collected and analyzed written student surveys. These surveys asked students such questions as, “where bullying occur in the school?” School staff can then use this information in crafting a school-wide strategy for countering bullying.

How would SEL help turn around a failing school?

There are no silver bullets in education. Turning around a school requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy—and SEL programs and practices are an essential part of that strategy.

SEL programs help by:

- giving school leaders a conceptual framework and tools to help them take a comprehensive approach to fostering a positive school and classroom climate where students can learn
- creating a congenial collaborative relationship among school staff , which has been shown to improve student performance
- improving discipline and the climate in the classroom—with a resulting improvement in students' academic performance
- increasing students' sense of connection to school, their attendance, and their academic performance
- helping students better handle their feelings so they can focus on their studies and improve their individual performance
- fostering good behavior and character skills that will serve students well not only in school, but throughout their lives

How much does it cost to implement an SEL program?

The cost of our 4Rs Program is quite modest: about \$150 per child per year.