

Guide To 10+ Virtual SEL Activities for Elementary Students

A remote environment challenges teachers to search for new virtual SEL activities for elementary students to help them learn social and communication skills.

Enrich Your Digital Classroom With 20+ Virtual SEL Activities for Elementary Students

75% of the words students use to describe how they feel at school are negative. Common words are tired, stressed, and bored¹. Our job as teachers is to address that with fun and exciting virtual SEL activities for elementary students.

I've been an elementary school teacher since 2014, and I love my job and my students. It hurts that I can't stand by the door every morning to greet every one of them. But I went through a lot of literature, forums, blogs, and reports like [this one](#) to find ways of building a virtual environment that brings us closer in the time of social distancing.

I was looking for general guiding principles and strategies to keep in mind while building my class plans. I was also interested in activities that I could use right away or keep in mind for the future.

After reading this article, you will learn:

- common approaches to teaching SEL virtually
- guiding principles for teaching SEL in virtual settings
- strategies and guidelines for teaching SEL remotely
- fun and simple activities for digital SEL teaching.

4 Ways to Teach Social Emotional Learning Virtually

Teaching social-emotional learning online is incredibly challenging since it's hard to substitute for in-person hugs, handshakes, high-fives, smiles, and tears. But there are many ways to teach social-emotional skills in a virtual classroom and give elementary students the experiences they need.

¹ Brackett, M. A. (2015). The emotional revolution. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://ei.yale.edu/what-we-do/emotion-revolution>

Some students need special attention, and if you're an SDC teacher, you can find additional information [in this article](#). But here are some ways to incorporate SEL into a digital environment to keep in mind when planning classes.

Play Games

Games help with communication, problem-solving, self-management, fostering patience, and building relationships.

There are a lot of games for social-emotional learning. To name a few:

- Scavenger hunt
- Hey, me too!
- Yes, and!
- Charades/Pictionary
- Comedy Hour
- Kahoot! Games like [this one](#)
- Show and Tell
- or even encouraging emojis in the chat.

Many games are no-prep, translate well to virtual settings, and integrate easily into a morning meeting or a warm-up.

Use Puppets

Research² suggests that using puppets as a pedagogical tool can help with co-operation in and integration into a group, generating communication, supporting a positive classroom climate, naming feelings, sharing, empathy.

Puppets can be helpful in various situations, from feelings role play to acting out difficult situations children may be experiencing at home.

Teach Calm Down Techniques

Calm down techniques like guided meditation, kids yoga (yes, it [exists!](#)) and [breathing exercises](#) increases cognitive functioning³ and emotional regulation⁴.

² Kröger, Tarja & Nupponen, Anne. (2019). Puppet as a Pedagogical Tool: A Literature Review. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*. 11. 1-14. 10.26822/iejee.2019450797

³ Hagen Ingunn, Nayar Usha, Yoga for Children and Young People's Mental Health and Well-Being: Research Review and Reflections on the Mental Health Potentials of Yoga, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 5 (2014). <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsy.2014.00035>

⁴ Waters, L., Barsky, A., Ridd, A. _et al._ Contemplative Education: A Systematic, Evidence-Based Review of the effect of Meditation Interventions in Schools. *Educ Psychol Rev*_ 27, 103–134 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-014-9258-2>

My students love to get away from monitors and do a cat pose or a balancing table pose. Yoga is well compatible with some breathing exercises too.

Find Teachable Moments

Teachable moments occur all the time. It can be challenging to detect them on the spot, but these are a few things you can look for:

- Talk about sharing when kids speak all at once in a Zoom meeting.
- Talk about self-control when children interrupt each other.
- Something sad is an opportunity to teach the class about empathy and support.

Utilize Books and Videos

There are a lot of books for social-emotional learning. No teacher needs convincing about the power of books.

For example, you can read aloud books about social distancing like [When We Stayed Home](#) by Tara Fass and Judith Proffer. [If You Can't Bear Hug. Air Hug](#) by Katie Sedmak is another excellent choice.

Another great resource is videos. [PBS/ Sesame Street](#) has a collection of free videos about emotions (puppets in action, am I right?). There are also many explanatory and [instructional videos](#) online.

It's also a good idea to use trusted sources and always vet books and videos before recommending them to your students.

Strategies for Supporting SEL in Virtual Settings

These strategies are general guidelines and best practices for supporting [SEL in the virtual classroom](#).

Say Their Names

Our names are an essential part of our identity. The simple act of calling someone by name triggers a unique reaction in the brain⁵. This reaction suggests the need to be seen, stand out, and be acknowledged.

The overuse of someone's name can be frustrating and annoying, so try to find a balance. Simple "glad that you are with us, Tommy" should do it.

⁵ Carmody DP, Lewis M. Brain activation when hearing one's own and others' names. *Brain Res.* 2006;1116(1):153-158. doi:10.1016/j.brainres.2006.07.121

Respect and inclusion are fundamental for SEL, and it's a good practice to make sure to use the names that children prefer and the correct pronunciation.

Share You First

Modeling is a big part of education, and many students look up to their teachers and copy their habits. We can use that. We better use that.

You can share your emotions and feelings, tell them appropriate personal stories and let them know you. After that, they will be more open to modeling your behavior.

Daily/Frequent Student Check-Ins

The practice of check-ins from the offline school world is old but good. Maybe even better in today's circumstances.

At the beginning of the year and once in a while, you can reach out to your students individually. It's more helpful to do it outside of the regular curriculum and chat with them. It can help you understand their environment, hopes, fears, and expectations.

And it shows them that you care.

Connect Before Correct

It's another strategy from offline practice, but it becomes ever so crucial in the remote environment.

Parents can be defensive when it comes to their kids. I'm guilty of that myself sometimes. They will welcome your suggestions or questions more after establishing that you're on the same side.

Once in a while, you can reach out to parents just to let them know what a great job their kid is doing. It can open hearts and ears.

Foster Growth Mindset

Growth mindset is the term coined by Dr. Carol Dweck in her book [*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*](#). A growth mindset states that we develop and grow through hard work, practice, strategies, and help.

Alternatively, a fixed mindset means that there's a threshold on your intelligence and abilities that you will not cross, no matter what you do.

In practice, it means seeing mistakes as the gateway to learning and changing how we think about ourselves.

When it comes to your students, you can help them rephrase their thoughts from negative ("I can't do that," "I never do anything right," etc.) to positive ("I'm still learning," "Some things are hard to grasp" etc.)

You can also praise effort over outcome. The entanglement with the result makes students unhappy and anxious since they see everything as an evaluation of their personality. If you redirect their attention to the effort, the anxiety goes away.

Teach Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship means the code of conduct that makes our virtual environment safe and inclusive. It addresses cyberbullying, safety online, protection of personal information, respect for copyright, and a lot more.

It's crucial to have a healthy digital environment. If you can teach your students the basics of [digital citizenship](#) it can go a long way to create a basis for SEL.

10 Virtual SEL Activities for Elementary Students

SEL key competencies include:

- Self-awareness
- Self-Management
- Social awareness
- Relationships Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making.

For each of the competencies, there are several virtual SEL activities for elementary students. This list is not exhaustive, but it's a good outset of a rich SEL environment.

Self-awareness: Mindful Minutes

Mindful minutes are sometimes (as little as a couple of minutes) that you and your students spend on a [mindful activity](#).

It can be a short meditation or a breathing exercise and an introspection session or journaling.

Use them as frequently as comfortable and appropriate, but keep in mind that they can be complex and novel.

Self-awareness: Characterize Me

Characterize Me is a game where students encourage someone they know to describe them in several sentences.

It's always interesting to see ourselves through the eyes of others, and it can help to detect and correct some behavior.

If, for example, you have a shy student that underestimates herself, honest feedback from you or someone else she respects can boost her self-esteem.

Self-Management: Bridges and Barriers

Bridges and Barriers is a game that starts with students identifying a goal they have at the moment. Then they brainstorm things that can help them to achieve the goal ("bridges") or obstacles that hold them ("barriers").

Bridges and Barriers is a game that teaches perspective and problem-solving. And you can play that game any time some of your students face opposition or feel stuck.

Self-Management: Positive Thinking Affirmation Activity

Positive thinking and affirmations have been around for a long time now. They can help us see the bright side of life, fight negative emotions and disturb destructive thought patterns.

You and your students can pick some positive affirmations you all like and recite them together from time to time.

Social awareness: Cultural Show-and-Tell

Your students can do good old Show-and-Tell centered around some culture-specific topics.

Please encourage them to share the customs and traditions, family history or lineage, as well as fascinating facts about their culture.

It can help to have an interactive whiteboard like the ones from [this article](#) to show the slides. Still, it's also possible with Zoom's built-in screen sharing functionality.

Social awareness: Social Problem-Solving Task Cards

Social problem-solving task cards have some problems to solve as a group or individually. Depending on the topic and your plan, it can be one card once in a while or a whole brainstorming session.

You can create those cards yourself or find them [online](#).

Some games like [Can You Name That Emotion?](#) can be helpful to build social awareness.

Relationships Skills: Special Interest Groups

Create a Google Doc with common interests like sports, movies, hiking, biking, etc. Ask your students to put their names under their interests.

Common interests connect us, and kids can find unexpected common ground with their peers.

Relationships Skills: Open Mic

Some teachers have an actual mic to help them be heard, and you will find a lot of them [here](#). You can't pass it to someone online, but you can give the stage to those who are eager to share something.

The open mic can be themed or not. You can plan a big session or have a little impromptu session at the end of the day or as a break.

Responsible Decision-Making: Our Three Brains

We have three brains – our "HEAD" brain, our "HEART" brain, and our "GUT" brain. The "head" brain is reasoning, the "heart" brain is emotions, and the "gut" brain is intuition.

You can teach your students to recognize where and when they engage their different "brains." Describe a situation, let children play with it, and see whether they approach it logically, emotionally, or intuitive.

Responsible Decision-Making: Better Brainstorming

Brainstorming sessions can be a fun and insightful way to solve problems and see how others approach complex tasks. You can incorporate the occasional brainstorming session into your classroom and help your students find solutions together.

Conclusion

Social-emotional learning is what students get from the school besides the knowledge. It's everyday interactions with peers and teachers that help kids adapt and deal with the world outside and within them.

The remote environment changes many things, and younger kids' teachers must innovate, finding new virtual SEL activities for elementary students. Now you know a lot of them.