



Mental Health Literacy Brief for Elementary School Educators

Interlinking Mental Health Literacy and Social Emotional Learning

Mental Health Literacy (MHL) involves students' understanding of age-appropriate mental health concepts, recognition of mental health stigma, awareness of available resources, and development of effective coping strategies. MHL aims to create a supportive school environment where mental well-being is prioritized.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is broadly understood as a process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and life.

Students utilize social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, such as self-awareness to grasp how mental health influences their lives. Mental Health Literacy (MHL) integrates SEL skills to help students comprehend the effects of mental health on their behaviors and emotions, enhance their ability to communicate with trusted adults, and understand the steps to take when experiencing distress.



Teaching mental health literacy in elementary school is important for several reasons:

- **Reduction of Stigma:** By bringing more awareness to mental health, schools can help reduce stigma associated with mental health challenges. This can encourage children to seek help if they need it and support peers who may be struggling.
- **Coping Strategies:** Teaching children effective coping strategies and self-management skills equip them to handle mental health challenges. This foundation can promote resilience and overall well-being.
- **Improved Academic Performance:** Mental health is closely linked to academic success. Students who understand and manage their mental health are often more focused, engaged, and able to learn effectively.
- **Social Skills Development:** Learning about mental health helps children develop important social management and engagement skills; which is essential for building healthy relationships.

OSPI adopted the SEL standards and benchmarks to ensure that students learn these important skills. These SEL standards are:

Self-Awareness	Social Awareness
Self-Management	Social Management
Self-Efficacy	Social Engagement

What Mental Health Literacy Looks Like in Elementary Schools

Lesson Integration:

Mental health topics can be woven into existing subjects, such as health education, social studies, or even during story time with age-appropriate books that discuss emotions and mental health themes.

• Activities and Workshops

Interactive activities, such as role-playing or group discussions, can help children practice recognizing feelings and discussing emotions in a safe environment.

• Mindfulness Practices:

Incorporating mindfulness exercises, like deep breathing or guided imagery, into the daily routine can help children manage stress and improve focus.

• Peer Support Programs:

Establishing buddy systems or peer support groups allows students to help one another and fosters a sense of community and belonging.

• Engagement with Families:

Educating families about mental health can reinforce what children learn in school, ensuring that they have support at home.

• Training for Staff:

Providing teachers and school staff with training on mental health literacy ensures they can effectively support students and recognize signs of mental health challenges.



Educators, students, and parents: Each have a role in MHL and SEL

By providing students with crucial skills, mental health literacy lays a solid foundation for emotional well-being. SEL and MHL empower individuals to manage mental health challenges healthily as they grow, while creating a supportive environment where they feel understood and recognized. They learn to prioritize their mental health equally to physical health.

Educators

Foster a supportive learning environment that will help with emotional regulation, knowledge on mental health challenges, stigma awareness and guidance towards services within the school and community.

Students

Focus on building mental health awareness, stigma reducing and advocacy skills; empathy and resilience are cultivated as an outcome to navigate life's challenges.

Parents

Are primary influencers by modeling emotional awareness, open mindedness and communication, and emphasize the development of mental health awareness and advocacy skills at home.

Resources

- [OSPI SEL](#) Webpage offers a breakdown of SEL in WA state, implementation resources, professional development and additional resources.
- [Mental Health Instruction Library](#) offers a comprehensive list evidence-based resources, developed by Chad's Legacy and UW SMART Center.
- [CASEL School Guide](#) & [Mental Health Literacy](#) evidenced-based content for SEL and MHL school implementation.
- [CDC](#) offers resources and information on mental health stigma.
- [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) has education resources for information on mental health topics, including lesson plans and activities.
- [Oregon Department of Education](#) offers extensive information on integrating mental and overall health services in schools.
- [Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) has education resources on mental health comprehension, and common mental health challenges and disorders.
- [Youth.gov](#) offers information on mental health promotion and prevention.
- [ACT for Youth](#) provides resources for response and prevention for mental health stressors.

For additional information, please contact Joshua Kent, Mental health Literacy Specialist at josh.kent@k12.wa.us