

SEAL it with a kiss!

It's easy to scoff at the idea of children going to school to learn about their emotions. But the new Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme teaches strategies they can use in school and out, says teacher Robert Watts

Many children recently returned to school to find a mysterious new lesson on the timetable. Alongside maths and art there was now a slot for SEAL. But any thoughts of balancing balls on their noses were quickly dispelled: SEAL stands for Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning and it's the government's latest initiative aimed at raising standards in schools.

'Schools are not just academic institutions,' said John Dunford, secretary-general of the Secondary Heads Association. 'They have always tried to help children grow up with a good emotional understanding of the people around them.'

So is the SEAL programme a genuine step towards meeting the needs of young children in schools? How does it work in practice? And can it really contribute towards raising standards of behaviour and attainment in our primary schools?

How it works

The aim is to promote positive behaviour and effective learning. The government wants to support teachers by identifying issues that affect children's learning and by providing teaching materials which will improve their motivation and social skills, their self-awareness and their ability to manage their own feelings while empathising with others.

The materials take the form of themed lesson plans which are meant



SEAL can have a marked impact on children's achievement

to help children cope with issues that often arise in school or at home. Many children find change difficult, so some of the material focuses on this area, including changing class. A key feature is that the lesson plans are not linked exclusively to one curriculum area and teachers are encouraged to view SEAL as something that reaches across subject boundaries. Selected stories are often used to reinforce key learning points and to highlight how other people might think or feel in a given situation.

Teachers can use material that is appropriate for their pupils. For example, if some children are disrupting the class, the teacher might use a lesson on 'Getting on and falling out'. This will offer children strategies for avoiding and dealing with conflict, including structured discussion where children are encouraged to make suggestions.

In practice

West Drayton Primary School is one of 500 schools that took part in a pilot scheme to evaluate the programme before it went nationwide. Head Teacher Adrian Ingham is convinced that SEAL has been a key factor in his school's success. He explains: 'At the



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beginning of term we have a whole school assembly which takes the theme of new beginnings and uses a story provided by the SEAL programme. One is about things that the children like and dislike about school. We create a tree on which all of the things that they like are hung and we have a waste paper bin in which the things they don't like, such as bullying and litter, are ritually deposited. These are the things we are trying to eliminate.'

The theme is then reinforced in work in the classroom from nursery up to Year 6. 'Our teachers adapt the materials for use in other projects and it's worked very well for us,' says Adrian. 'It's always taken seriously by the children, but it's also done with a sense of fun and it's held the children's interest.'

Pupils at West Drayton are encouraged to participate in questionnaires. They also take part in circle time, a valuable opportunity for them to express themselves and develop their listening and empathetic skills. And a school council has been established to represent their views. 'They have become very candid and able to articulate what they feel,' says Adrian. 'This wasn't the case before.'

What SEAL can do

While it's not compulsory, the SEAL programme is likely to be adopted by huge numbers of schools that aspire to create a positive learning environment. 'Teachers are very positive about it,' reports Adrian Ingham. Staff at West Drayton were, he explains, already committed to improving the provision they made for pupils and the SEAL programme helped provide them with a clear focus. 'It fits our school's general ethos and philosophy of trying to boost children's confidence and encouraging them to talk openly.'

The close link between a school's level of attainment and its record on pupil behaviour is often overlooked. Teachers working in challenging schools are generally very sensitive to the underlying causes of disruptive behaviour and aware that confidence is a key issue.

'Our motto is "From self-confidence to achievement",' says Adrian. 'It was my belief when I came here that, unless we got the children feeling



It offers parents some genuinely effective strategies for improving children's motivation and social skills

good about themselves, able to work with others as a team and able to speak openly and positively about themselves, then they were not going to move forward in their learning.'

At West Drayton, SEAL is reaping rewards. 'In 1999 our results were in the bottom 0.6 per cent in the country,' says Adrian. 'There were only 189 schools with worse results out of 18,000. In an Ofsted report earlier this year we got an "outstanding" judgement and pupils' emotional well-being got a top rating.'

And it's not just at West Drayton that things are changing for the better, as increasing numbers of schools report that the SEAL programme has had a positive impact. 'Teachers who have started to use the SEAL materials are enthusiastic and impressed by how positive the children are to one another and the understanding they

are showing of their own feelings,' says educational psychologist Maggie Matthews. 'Through stories and activities, children are being helped to recognise and name their feelings, respect one another and cope with situations that could make them feel angry.'

SEAL, she says, can have a marked impact on children's achievement: 'Children with the skills that SEAL teaches are more likely to learn, less likely to bully or be bullied, and less likely to be part of a negative cycle of getting into trouble. They are likely to be more self-aware, empathetic and mature than I was at their age.'

A better balance

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum almost 20 years ago, there has been a firm emphasis placed upon what children are taught and what they achieve, rather than on their experience of school life as a whole. The role of the school as a community, as a nurturing environment, as a place that takes account of the needs of the individual child has often been subsumed in the drive to meet targets. SEAL aims to redress this imbalance.

'I know that there are people who are sceptical about what they call the teaching of emotions,' says Adrian. 'But I suspect they're people who have very little experience of working with children, who come from homes where speaking openly is not the norm. In our case SEAL has been a very good prop.'