

Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., and Steven E. Tobias, Psy.D.

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# BOOST Emotional INTELLIGENCE in Students

30  
Flexible  
Research-Based  
Activities to Build EQ Skills  
(Grades 5–9)

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*Praise for* **BOOST**  
**Emotional Intelligence**  
**in Students**

“*Boost Emotional Intelligence in Students* provides a wonderful resource for educators to integrate emotional intelligence skills into their classrooms. From identifying emotions to building resilience, the activities in this book can help students develop into healthy, happy, and productive citizens.”

—**Marc A. Brackett, Ph.D.**, director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and professor at the Yale Child Study Center

“All teachers and other school professionals working with students in grades 5 to 9 should read this valuable volume. For experienced educators, it offers a wealth of new strategies to promote emotional intelligence; for novices, it provides an excellent and highly practical introduction to the field. Elias and Tobias have done a masterful job of translating the EQ research into, in their words, ‘pragmatic, accessible, and flexible activities.’ I will be strongly recommending this book to all my colleagues.”


—**Paul LeBuffe**, vice president of research and development, Aperture Education

“*Boost Emotional Intelligence in Students* is exactly what schools need to support social-emotional growth in students. Drs. Elias and Tobias provide an easy-to-understand, step-by-step guide for schools to integrate social and emotional skills building into the classroom. As school psychologists, we understand the importance of building these skills for success in school and life. This book provides everything we need to begin the process.”

—**John Kelly, Ph.D.**, president, National Association of School Psychologists, 2017–2018

“Using evidence-based lessons, engaging activities, and community-building strategies, this resource provides a valuable tool for educators to build emotional intelligence in students—an essential goal of education in the 21st century. By supporting the development of emotional intelligence, this book helps teachers prepare their students for success in careers and in life.”

—**Andria Amador**, senior director, Behavioral Health Services, Boston Public Schools



“This is an excellent collection of engaging activities to enhance the social and emotional learning of middle school students. It is a valuable resource for educators, counselors, youth leaders, and mental health professionals who aspire to educate and inspire adolescents to become more knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and contributing members of their communities.”

—**Roger P. Weissberg, Ph.D.**, chief knowledge officer, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

“Many educators want to improve their students’ social and emotional intelligence, but don’t know how best to do so. Written by two distinguished psychologists, this wonderful book for teachers is practical, flexible, wise, and consistent with good pedagogical practice. Grounded in research on social-emotional learning and adolescent development, this book equips teachers with the basic knowledge they need to employ the lessons and tools effectively, along with exercises and language that should be attractive to their students.”

—**David Osher, Ph.D.**, vice president and AIR Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research

“Grounded in their conviction that EQ should be at the center of teaching and learning, the authors of *Boost Emotional Intelligence in Students* provide educators with thirty lessons for middle grade students. The powerful lessons on self-talk offer welcome guidance for building this lifelong skill, which strengthens resilience in students who need it most. The lessons on social roles invite students to consider the strengths they bring to their social identities, which are growing in importance and complexity during adolescence. Ultimately, all the lessons in this book promise to draw students into deeper self-awareness and closer reflection on their developing EQ skills. Definitely a key resource that educators will want on the shelf!”

—**Christa M. Tinari**, coauthor of *Create a Culture of Kindness in Middle School* and director of The Peaceful Schools Institute

“There exists an important need to translate academic research into classroom practice quickly and directly. This book answers that need by presenting key ideas and activities that teachers can try out with their students immediately. I wish more resources for teachers were created by people like Drs. Elias and Tobias. *Boost Emotional Intelligence in Students* could have an impact on the ongoing development and implementation of social-emotional learning.”

—**Roisin P. Corcoran, Ph.D.**, associate professor of education at UCD and coauthor of *Developing Emotionally Competent Teachers: Emotional Intelligence and Pre-Service Teacher Education*

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by Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., and Steven E. Tobias, Psy.D.

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# Foreword

by Norris M. Haynes, Ph.D.

Among my most cherished professional experiences are those during which I've collaborated with colleagues like Maurice Elias and Steven Tobias, who share my commitment to promoting and strengthening social and emotional skills in students and adults alike. Working at the Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab at Rutgers University—and specifically serving on the advisory committee for the Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC) middle school project—has given me insight into how Maurice and Steven approach the valuable work of building students' emotional intelligence (EQ).

The authors' focus in this book on the social and emotional needs of students in grades 5 through 9, in particular, is important. These are years of intense change and growth. And the challenges and dilemmas faced by students this age are more difficult and complex than those faced by younger children. Along with experiencing many developmental changes, students face shifts in their relationships and interactions with adults, including parents, teachers, and others. Additionally, many middle school students express worry about issues including their social standing among peers, their family roles, their academic abilities, and more. Confusion or stress about personal identities and social acceptance become more prominent and can be intensified or complicated by social media platforms that provide access to huge amounts of information and nearly unlimited online social interaction. At the same time, students are in the process of critically examining and assessing who they are, what they need and want, why they make the choices they do, and where they hope to be in the years ahead. These dramatic changes require educators and other caring adults to support students' healthy social and emotional development and guide the self-reflective inquiries that these young people are engaged in—which can lead to mature levels of thinking and behaving. A practical and flexible way to implement this support and guidance is one of the many things this book provides.

One key foundation of this book is social-emotional learning (SEL). As defined by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the five core competencies of SEL are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These five competencies are, in turn, grounded in two major dimensions of emotional intelligence: an internal dimension encompassing a student's capacity to recognize, monitor, manage, and express his or her feelings in healthy ways, and an external dimension concerned with the student's capacity to interact with peers and adults, including being aware of others' feelings and needs and responding appropriately. These skills and others—which young people in the 21st century need more than ever before—are defined, explored, and taught by the lessons in this book.

The benefits of this instruction in emotional intelligence are myriad. Strong social and emotional skills have been linked to improved behaviors and school outcomes, including decreases in school violence, dropout rates, disinterest, and underachievement. In addition, research clearly shows that students do better

academically when their social and emotional needs are intentionally and thoughtfully addressed as part of a school's curriculum, activities and culture. Similarly, students who experience overall school success tend to demonstrate higher levels of emotional intelligence than less successful peers. In other words, to be most effective in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional development, educators must teach and model strong life skills just as they do academic skills. As you'll see, this teaching and modeling can be implemented in a variety of ways and settings, including proactively promoting and strengthening positive attitudes and behaviors through developmental guidance lessons in classrooms, holding small-group meetings to build students' repertoire of adaptive and successful skill sets while enhancing their existing strengths, and working with individual students to address academic, social, and emotional challenges.

The authors also recognize the importance of a conducive and facilitative school climate. In tandem with implementing EQ and SEL instruction, educators, schools, and even districts can take concrete steps to create that climate, including:

- ▶ challenging young people to be the best they can be
- ▶ setting and maintaining high standards and expectations for social behavior as well as academic achievement
- ▶ establishing clear rules and standards for conduct
- ▶ increasing a sense of belonging—as well as the desire to learn—through engaging and meaningful learning activities inside and outside the classroom
- ▶ creating a positive, caring, responsive, and supportive school culture
- ▶ providing tutoring and guidance to enhance academic achievement
- ▶ making students aware of a variety of possibilities for successful futures
- ▶ supporting students' ongoing skill building in EQ and SEL with opportunities such as:
  - ▷ mentoring
  - ▷ cultural diversity and cultural awareness education
  - ▷ conflict resolution and peer mediation education
  - ▷ substance abuse and alcohol prevention education
  - ▷ individual and group counseling
- ▶ creating a plan to support and sustain these initiatives

Maurice Elias and Steven Tobias's careful analysis of and pragmatic approach to EQ instruction provide the tools teachers, counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and administrators need to build and enhance every student's social and emotional competencies, becoming what I call Social and Emotional Support Providers. And when educators at all levels work to give students this support, weaving the concepts of emotional intelligence into the fabric of every school day, results follow. Given the importance of this work—not just to test scores and classroom management, but also to the greater success and happiness of every student—I believe this book is required reading for today's and tomorrow's educators. I wish you success and inspiration in this essential endeavor.



# Introduction

As an educator, you already understand the importance of emotional intelligence (also called EQ), and you are probably already teaching it, even if you may not be sure precisely how to define it. Whatever your role is at school—counselor, classroom teacher, mental health professional, nurse, recess monitor, aide, administrator, or anyone else responsible for students’ safety and well-being—you are likely teaching, facilitating, and modeling EQ skills like problem-solving and conflict resolution every day. You deal directly with students’ feelings, relationships, and problems, whether they are part of the curriculum or not. If you are a classroom teacher, you are not only teaching students academic content, but also fostering in them essential skills for handling emotions such as frustration, worry, and anger. And you know that kids learn better in a climate of positive relationships—between you and students and between students and their peers.

The purpose of this book is to give you the tools to make your EQ efforts more structured, intentional, and successful—as well as easier. Our experience over three decades has shown us that while teacher training colleges are increasingly aware of the importance of integrating emotional intelligence skills into instruction, many school practitioners are still looking for more hands-on resources. Our intention is to provide you with practical, realistic guidance that is supported by research and has been proven in practice, and we present an organized yet flexible approach to bringing emotional intelligence into the classroom.

Of course, EQ skills come more naturally to some people than to others, just as academic, athletic, and artistic abilities do. And no matter how bright, social, or confident a student may be, there are always areas in which he or she can improve. EQ skills are like any other skill taught in school: There is always more to learn. *All* students can learn, strengthen, and expand their EQ abilities. Doing so will help them become more self-aware and self-reflective—characteristics that are especially important during the crucial, transitional, and often challenging years of grades 5 through 9.

# What Is Emotional Intelligence and Why Should We Teach It?

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Emotional intelligence can be concisely defined as:

*EQ: The ability to manage one's feelings and interact positively with other people*

This is the core of EQ. Yet emotional intelligence goes far beyond this snapshot. EQ involves both the emotional skills and the social skills necessary for happiness and success in school and life, and students who are not prepared with these skills will be at a serious disadvantage in their educational and career trajectories. High EQ is tied to a positive sense of self, as well as to the ability to have meaningful and rewarding relationships with others. Like its partner and complement IQ (which is primarily about a person's reasoning ability), EQ promotes academic achievement and helps students become more available for learning.<sup>1</sup> This is true for several

reasons. Strong feelings—especially those related to stress—can interfere with clear thinking, so students who are able to manage difficult emotions will therefore be better able to attend to the task at hand in challenging circumstances.

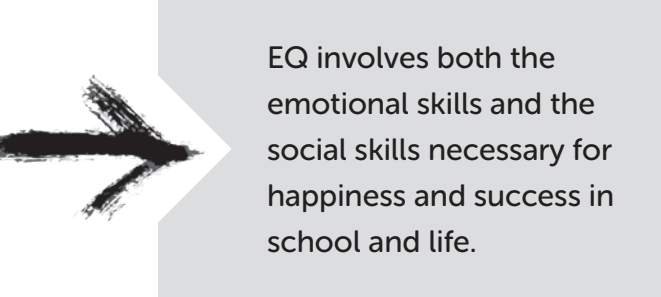
Additionally, emotional intelligence is more highly correlated with career success than are academic skills.<sup>2</sup> Most employers value responsible, hard-working employees who can handle stress,

communicate clearly and assertively, act with integrity, find creative solutions to problems, anticipate and manage challenges, resolve conflicts, and get along with coworkers. Every one of these skills is an aspect of emotional intelligence.

Or, as a report from the World Economic Forum put it:

*A recent longitudinal analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) across nine countries showed that having a balanced set of cognitive and social and emotional skills is crucial for children to better face the challenges of the 21st century; social and emotional skills in particular play an important role in improving children's chances of lifetime success.<sup>3</sup>*

Also, as human beings, we are social creatures—and this is especially true of pre-adolescents and adolescents. For your students, positive relationships (especially those with their peers) provide emotional support and help them feel more secure about themselves and their world, which in turn can enable them to challenge themselves and grow. Furthermore, students who are good at solving social and emotional problems in keeping with their own values are likely to be more successful in all areas of life. This is what EQ is all about.



EQ involves both the emotional skills and the social skills necessary for happiness and success in school and life.

For all these reasons and more, we believe that teaching emotional intelligence is not optional or supplemental, but rather is an integral facet of education. The learning of these skills is a developmental right and an issue of social justice and equity. Preparing students for the world of their adulthood—a global community requiring sophisticated understanding of oneself as well as of other people and their motives, perspectives, capabilities, and desires—is one of our most critical jobs as educators. EQ can help.

Teaching emotional intelligence is not optional or supplemental, but rather an integral facet of education. The learning of these skills is a developmental right and an issue of social justice and equity. Preparing students for the world of their adulthood is one of our most critical jobs as educators.



## What Are the Essential Skills of Emotional Intelligence?

If you've ever seen a newborn, you know that his or her first smile—usually at a parent—is a major milestone. That smile cements a bond between parent and child, and it's an early example of the importance of relationship skills in all areas of life. Nearly everything we do throughout our lives depends on our emotional intelligence, from maintaining healthy relationships to achieving our goals. So it's essential to understand the components that make up this essential human competency. EQ can be broken down into three main skill areas:

1. Self-awareness and self-management:
  - ▶ the ability to assess and know one's own emotions, values, and capabilities (both strengths and weaknesses)
  - ▶ the ability to cope with emotions and maintain self-control
  - ▶ the ability to persevere to achieve a goal
2. Social awareness and relationship skills:
  - ▶ the ability to understand others and empathize with an awareness of individual and group similarities and differences
  - ▶ the ability to communicate effectively, both perceiving others' messages and expressing oneself
  - ▶ the ability to work cooperatively with others
3. Responsible decision-making and problem-solving:
  - ▶ the ability to establish positive goals
  - ▶ the ability to implement effective behaviors to achieve those goals
  - ▶ the ability to resolve interpersonal conflicts constructively



## SHOWING OTHERS THE EVIDENCE

Some people might challenge you on the need for EQ instruction, thinking that it's not worth instructional time or that it's little more than touchy-feely pop psychology. We've laid out the arguments and research showing the value of building emotional intelligence skills not only for students' social-emotional benefit, but also as an academic improvement strategy. But you may also find it useful to have at hand a quick, clear rationale to share with skeptics. Fortunately, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) maintains an ongoing and updated list of research and evidence related to EQ instruction at their website ([casel.org](http://casel.org)). The following is a concise summary of findings across dozens of studies.<sup>4</sup>

**Intentional, high-quality EQ instruction is linked to the following student gains:**

- greater social-emotional skills
- improved attitudes toward self, others, and school
- increase in positive classroom behavior
- gains of 10 to 11 percentile points on standardized achievement tests

**Teaching EQ skills is also tied to the following reduced risks for failure:**

- fewer conduct problems
- reduction in aggressive behavior
- less emotional distress
- lower likelihood of substance abuse

Additionally, the evidence supporting EQ instruction is international, which indicates the importance of social-emotional competencies to all cultures and contexts. The World Economic Forum's report on social-emotional education states:

*To thrive in the 21st century, students need more than traditional academic learning. They must be adept at collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, which are some of the skills developed through social and emotional learning (SEL). Coupled with mastery of traditional skills, social and emotional proficiency will equip students to succeed in the swiftly evolving digital economy.<sup>5</sup>*

Further, in an important extended study of reasons why some students (particularly those from low-income environments) have relatively low college entry and graduation rates, researchers Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne M. Bouffard highlight failures to provide these students with opportunities to build their social-emotional competencies, especially their positive self-talk. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard label this shortcoming as one of the most neglected equity issues in our schools and society today, and they argue that this instruction is essential for giving all students a true chance at college, career, and life success.<sup>6</sup>

Although these skills might seem like common sense, as Voltaire observed (and as most of us have seen for ourselves at one time or another), “common sense is not so common.” And because these skills are so important for students’ development and for their futures, we don’t want to take teaching them for granted. We all know smart kids who make poor choices, kids with generous hearts who have trouble making friends, sensitive kids who can be hurtful to others, and kids with great potential who struggle to harness their abilities and direct them positively. These kids, and all our students, can benefit from further development of their EQ skills, which they will need when negotiating everyday challenges, large and small. Indeed, many of these skills may already be familiar to you from other contexts, such as drug abuse prevention and anti-bullying programs as well as character education curricula. The lessons in this book are compatible with and can complement many other forms of instruction that promote students’ social and emotional learning.

Nearly everything we do throughout our lives depends on our emotional intelligence, from maintaining healthy relationships to achieving our goals.



## EQ Skills and the Adolescent Brain

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The adolescent brain is notable for its advanced development in emotions without corresponding developmental advances in self-control.<sup>7</sup> During adolescence, the limbic system—a primitive area deep inside the brain that humans share with all mammals—is developing faster than the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for judgment and self-control. The limbic system seeks stimulus, sometimes through risk-taking behaviors and other intense experiences, and is triggered by social and emotional stimuli.<sup>8</sup> It can feel good to the teen brain to have the limbic system stimulated by things such as horror movies, sexual experiences, social media interactions, recognition from peers, sports and competition, drugs, music, gossip, parties, video games, or even just good friends. These experiences can provide quick and easy stimulation, but not all of them are safe. However, adolescents don’t always reflect on safety when they are seeking excitement.<sup>9</sup> This failure to evaluate risk or consider consequences has nothing to do with cognitive ability. Middle school students are just as capable of understanding things as adults are. Nevertheless, their capability for thoughtful decision-making can be overshadowed or overridden by their intense responses to social relationships and feelings.

Another way to look at this idea is through a distinction drawn by psychologist Daniel Kahneman between what he calls two ways of thinking: System 1 and System 2 in our brains.<sup>10</sup> System 1 (similar to the limbic system) responds quickly, is driven primarily by emotion and intuition, and is highly self-protective. System 2



## HOW EQ INSTRUCTION SUPPORTS BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

In addition to its other benefits, EQ education is an important aspect of classroom management. Since EQ, by definition, is the ability to manage emotions, get along with others, and problem-solve effectively, students with strengths in emotional intelligence are less likely to be disruptive, struggle with self-regulation, or get into trouble. Therefore, teaching EQ skills is a proactive way to prevent behavior issues. Similarly, this book's EQ lessons are proactive because they help students work together, develop social skills, and establish relationships. The more connected students feel to their school and their peers, the less likely they are to engage in inappropriate or antisocial behavior.

EQ instruction also provides support for students who have already presented behavior challenges. A child cannot be punished into compliance. Simply telling students that they're doing something wrong is unlikely to motivate them to behave appropriately or help them understand what to do instead. Imagine that a student fails a test but rather than being retaught the material or otherwise supported, is just given a low grade with no additional guidance. We view inappropriate behavior in a similar way. It stems from deficits in skills or motivation, which can and must be addressed through supportive instruction. Once students have been taught the necessary skills, they can be prompted to use those skills in challenging situations.

Naturally, students with particularly challenging behaviors or disorders need more supportive instruction than their peers and more time to unlearn ineffective behaviors and learn helpful ones founded on EQ skills. The materials in this book can be adapted accordingly. Explanations may be given and reviewed again; activities can be repeated; role-play practice can be done again with an adult providing constructive feedback. Whatever classroom management looks like in your school, EQ can help.

(analogous to the neocortex) is more reflective and analytical and takes its time, but is inclined to trust the judgment of System 1 using the principle, "Better safe than sorry." For adolescents, the combination of these systems—and the louder voice of System 1—can be dangerous. Consider a scenario in which a group of kids leaving a party are about to get a ride home with someone who has been drinking. The adult version of "better safe than sorry" would be advising you to call for another ride. But the middle school version may be saying, "It's safer to take this ride than risk all kinds of teasing in school tomorrow." It takes strong EQ in the moment for young people to listen to System 2, which remembers that getting in a car with a driver who has been drinking is never a risk worth taking. Adolescence is filled with stressful changes, both personal and social, that evoke strong emotional reactions in kids. From a developmental standpoint, it is no surprise that feelings and peer



pressure can sometimes overrule what adolescents rationally know to be better perspectives and choices.

So, given these biological and developmental realities, you may ask yourself whether it's truly realistic to teach middle school students how to manage their emotions and use their best knowledge and judgment. Might it be more logical to wait for the prefrontal cortex to further develop, and hope for the best in the meantime?

In fact, this is the perfect time to teach kids emotional awareness and self-regulation. The brain is most malleable while it is growing and developing, which means that at this time in students' lives, we have not only an opportunity but an obligation to promote self-understanding, self-control,

and good choices. Teaching adolescents to identify, name, and manage their feelings provides them with foundational skills for decision-making, problem-solving, and healthy interactions with others. The ability to cope with emotions—especially those that are challenging or complex—is an antidote to impulsive or reckless behavior and the key to a lifetime of strong and positive relationships.

“

**It takes something more than intelligence to act intelligently.**

—FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY IN *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

”

## Other Developmental Considerations

As you work to build emotional intelligence skills in your students, you will likely run into challenges, many connected to the fact that middle school is a time of dramatic development and flux for students' independence and identities. At this stage of development, it is useful to keep in mind the following ideas and consider how to adapt your instruction accordingly.

**Kids in middle school grades are beginning the work of differentiating and separating themselves** from the adults they have known and are looking more to their peer group to help them define their identities, desires, and goals. As they go through this process, increased conflict with parents and teachers is normal. It is important that adults not take it personally when adolescents push them away and recognize that this friction usually stems from the child's growing need for independence and identity rather than from flaws in the relationship with the adult. And to navigate these conflicts with adults, young people need strong skills for coping with social and personal challenges.

**Adolescents may also need help resolving conflicts with peers.** Because their relationships and emotions tend to be intense, your students may find it more difficult to get along with others than in the past. They tend to have many minor fights and disputes with little awareness of the possible consequences. Teaching restorative strategies and assertive communication for conflict resolution will help



## PREPARING FOR EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

Because these lessons deal directly with young people's problems, and because adolescents have a natural tendency to be somewhat dramatic, this work can be emotionally intense at times. Significant issues may come up, which can be uncomfortable for both the students and the group leader. As you're teaching emotional intelligence skills, it's important that you have backup: someone you can go to if a particularly challenging question or problem arises. We do not recommend that anyone implement EQ instruction in isolation. So find and partner with colleagues who can support you and with whom you can discuss what is going well, what could work better, and what you need help with.

If an issue does come up that you are not sure what to do with or how to handle, you can calmly but sensitively express empathy in the moment, and later speak to the student in private. You may also need to follow up with the larger group if something has come up that is upsetting to them. Depending on what issues have been discussed, you may need to follow up with someone else in the school or other authority.

kids manage these situations. When the need for discipline arises, it's helpful to think in terms of learning and corrective opportunities as opposed to punishment.

**Students view their world with greater sophistication** than when they were younger, and are able to be more aware of different perspectives, as well as being more aware of their own feelings. They are becoming more independent and complex in their thinking, while simultaneously becoming more susceptible to peer pressure. However, because their sense of self is not yet fully formed, they often feel acutely self-conscious and self-critical and may react to their uncertainties about themselves by being critical of others or rejecting them. Adolescents will also be inclined to frequently compare themselves to others, but must learn how to do this in a manner that allows them to accept themselves and others. EQ skills such as self-talk will help students achieve this balance and develop their individual sense of self. (For more information on self-talk, see Lessons 7 and 8.)

**Adolescents are coping with rapid physical and hormonal changes**, and with each passing year, they will be more aware of and interested in adult behaviors, including drug use, alcohol use, and sex. They will need to make healthy decisions for themselves regarding these behaviors within a context of social and familial values (many of which they will be questioning and evaluating). To do so, they need to develop their *own* values, as well as honing their skills in self-control. This presents a challenge for adults: How do we keep young people safe while also helping them become independent decision-makers? Keeping the lines of communication open no matter what happens is essential. Questionable decisions—even