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SOCIAL EMOTIONAL STORIES

Lessons and
Learning from
Plants and Animals

BARBARA A. LEWIS



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Learning from
Plants and Animals

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free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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DEDICATION

To my grandchildren, who still see the magic of nature:

Adam, Anderson, Andrew, Chloe, Clara, Houston, Jordan, Lizzie, Maddy, and Ruby

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CONTENTS

LIST OF REPRODUCIBLE PAGES	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
What Happens to a Brain on Stories?	1
What Is Social and Emotional Learning?.....	3
Why Use Stories About Plants and Animals?	5
How to Use This Book	7
Integrating This Book’s Lessons and Stories Across Subject Areas.....	9
A Final Word.....	12
JUMP-START LESSONS FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING	13
KEY WORD REFERENCE CHARTS	16
LESSON 1: Apes	19
LESSON 2: Bamboo.....	25
LESSON 3: Box Jellyfish.....	31
LESSON 4: Bristlecone Pine Trees.....	35
LESSON 5: Cats	40
LESSON 6: Coconut Crabs	46
LESSON 7: Crows.....	51
LESSON 8: Cuttlefish.....	57
LESSON 9: Dandelions.....	62
LESSON 10: Dogs.....	68

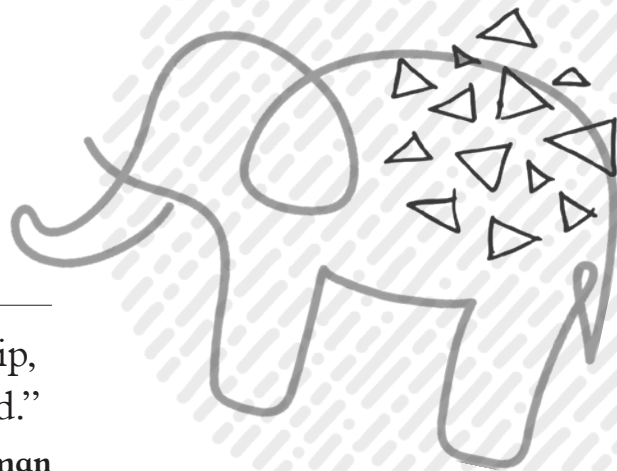


LESSON 11: Dolphins	75
LESSON 12: Elephants	81
LESSON 13: Fireflies	88
LESSON 14: Horses	94
LESSON 15: Metalmark Moths	100
LESSON 16: Oleanders	105
LESSON 17: Parrots	110
LESSON 18: Penguins	115
LESSON 19: Pigs	120
LESSON 20: Quaking Aspen Trees	126
LESSON 21: Squirrels	132
LESSON 22: Turkeys	138
LESSON 23: Venus Flytraps	144
LESSON 24: Wolves	150
GLOSSARY	155
RESOURCES	157
REFERENCES	163
INDEX	165
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	169

LIST OF REPRODUCIBLE PAGES

Awesome Apes.....	20	Heroic Horses.....	95
Sign Language Alphabet.....	digital content	Growing and Changing.....	digital content
Bountiful Bamboo.....	26	Star Breathing.....	digital content
Bamboo Haiku.....	digital content	Mighty Metalmark Moths.....	101
Box Jellyfish—Beautiful but Deadly.....	32	Copycats.....	digital content
Vinegar Words.....	digital content	Pretty, Poisonous Oleanders.....	106
Tough Bristlecone Pine Trees.....	36	Hidden in Plain Sight.....	digital content
Curious Cats.....	41	Playful Parrots.....	111
Cat Scenes.....	digital content	What’s It For?.....	digital content
Kitty Care.....	digital content	Penguin Partners.....	116
Creeping Coconut Crabs.....	47	Responsibility Roster.....	digital content
Words of Encouragement.....	digital content	Problem-Solving Pigs.....	121
Clever Crows.....	52	The Courage Box.....	digital content
All Mixed Up.....	digital content	Quaking Aspen Trees.....	127
The Not-So-Cuddly Cuttlefish.....	58	Cooperation Tree.....	digital content
Determined Dandelions.....	63	Aspen Leaf.....	digital content
Dandelion Survey.....	digital content	Spirited Squirrels.....	133
Dedicated Dogs.....	69	Planting Curiosity.....	digital content
A Furry Friend.....	digital content	Terrific Turkeys.....	138
Friendly Dolphins.....	76	Links of Citizenship.....	digital content
Amazing Elephants.....	82	Snappy Venus Flytraps.....	145
Flickering Fireflies.....	89	Wild Wolves.....	151
Firefly Poem.....	digital content	Good Question!.....	digital content

INTRODUCTION



“After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”

—Philip Pullman

As a teacher, you know that social and emotional learning (SEL) is at the core of your work with children. While it may sometimes be regarded as an “add-on” to curriculum, it’s anything but. SEL skills are critical to students’ success and provide a strong foundation for further development in character growth, positive habits, responsible choices, and more.

One of the greatest ways to set the stage for building these essential social and emotional skills in grades two through five (and beyond) is through stories. Storytelling is fundamental to our experience as humans. And powerful, well-told stories prepare our minds and hearts for growth, making storytelling a natural fit for pursuing SEL goals. Becoming absorbed in a story actively engages kids’ critical thinking skills as well as their empathy. In this book, you’ll learn and explore ways to use stories to build and strengthen your students’ SEL skills.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A BRAIN ON STORIES?

From drawings on cave walls to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales to traditional storytellers around the world, stories have been a major way to pass on knowledge, ideas, and values throughout human history. Stories can motivate us to change our attitudes, build relationships, and feel empathy for others.

Storytelling can engage listeners, spark change, provoke emotions, and teach skills. This makes

stories a perfect way to help children develop socially and emotionally as they live imaginatively through the characters’ experiences. When the brain is hooked on a story, there’s an explosion of activity, creating connections between neurons. This helps listeners and readers understand and participate in the story. As the tension builds in the narrative, the story follows the dramatic arc to its pinnacle. It transports its audience into the world of the character.

The boosted brain activity stimulated by a story increases the listener’s or reader’s ability to remember by seven times (Narrative IQ 2014). Especially when combined with thought-provoking questions, storytelling can increase children’s critical thinking skills, help kids develop social and emotional skills, and encourage them to develop positive character traits (Agosto 2013). All of these benefits make storytelling a great tool for teachers or anyone else working with young people.

What does a brain on stories *look* like? Researchers using MRI technology (magnetic resonance imaging) have traced blood flow to the parts of the brain that become involved with stories and have found that the brain lights up on a well-told story. The areas receiving blood flow are actively engaged. A story can sometimes lead to a nearly global engagement of the brain, as the imagination explodes with ideas (Yuan, Major-Girardin, and Brown 2018). This response shows that listeners or readers are feeling emotions which in turn can motivate them to better understand themselves and others, manage challenging emotions, and grow in positive behavior.





IMAGI-NATION

I like to think of the imagination as a special place where each person is in charge of their own country or kingdom. Anything can happen there. It's a bustle of activity where creative ideas are born. One child might dream up an idea for how to make a hover board, while another child envisions how to make a friendship. We all have a kind of "mental workspace" in the brain that coordinates input in creative and personal ways (Schlegel et al. 2013). That's the imagination at work. But it doesn't happen in a vacuum. It depends upon past experiences and connections that are already in the brain. And it depends upon reality. As the imagination molds these elements together in new ways, creative ideas are born. Stories help us spark this process in students.

Further, if someone tells a compelling story, the listener's brain can synchronize or match with the storyteller. In one study, a woman told a story to volunteers. The same areas of the listeners' brains were stimulated as in the storyteller's brain. When the storyteller felt emotion, an emotional response also took place in the brains of the listeners (Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson 2010).

Storytelling provides an effective tool for teaching social and emotional skills because stories can activate the same areas of the brain as experience does. In other words, imagining a sound or a shape changes how we see the world around us in the same way as actually hearing that sound or seeing that shape. So, *think* of a pickle, or a roaring stream, or your hair when you wake up in the morning. Your brain will react in similar ways as it would if you *held* a pickle, walked beside the roaring stream, or looked in shock at your hair in the mirror. "The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life. The same neurological regions

are stimulated," explains Keith Oatley, a researcher in cognitive psychology (Paul 2012).

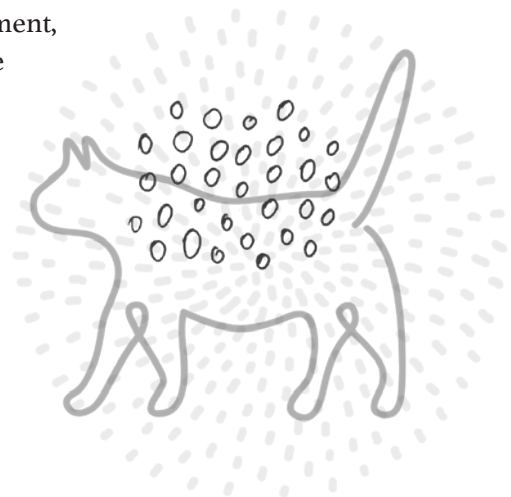
Storytelling can light the brain globally and make learning come alive. This does not mean that hearing a story is the same exact experience as real life. Still, it shows that you don't have to bring an elephant into your school—or even be sitting outside in nature—to have your nature story be successful! Well-told stories about animals and plants can teach social and emotional growth skills right from where you are sitting inside your classroom.

Other research taps into how stories are related to empathy—one of the cornerstones of social and emotional learning. Paul Zak, a professor of neuro-economics, conducted research on chemical changes in the brain that took place when people watched and listened to an emotional story (Future of StoryTelling 2012). Before and after the story, blood samples were collected from participants. The samples showed that two chemicals were released in their brains while watching the story. Those two chemicals were cortisol and oxytocin.

Cortisol is a neurochemical produced in the brain. It is released when people feel stressed and causes people to focus their attention. The participants who felt distressed by the story had elevated levels of cortisol.

Oxytocin is another neurochemical. The brain releases it when people feel empathy. In Zak's study, the participants who felt the most empathy for the characters in the story had more oxytocin in their bodies after the story than before. Participants also had higher heart rates and respiration. This showed the strong influence of a story on stimulating caring for others.

After the experiment, the participants were given a chance to share or donate money with a stranger or with a charity. The researchers found they could predict with 80 percent accuracy which



Powerful, well-told stories prepare our minds and hearts for growth.

participants would donate money. How? By the amount of oxytocin in their blood samples. Elevated oxytocin meant greater generosity (Zak 2013). As Zak reported, we can “change behavior by changing our brain chemistry” (Rodriguez 2017). A story can do this by inspiring the listeners to feel empathy for its characters. And that can transfer to real life.

In another study, researchers studied the influence of public service announcements or ads, which often use mini-stories to communicate their messages. Their findings showed that after viewing effective ads, participants had higher levels of oxytocin in their blood. A second result? People with the most oxytocin donated more to charities (Lin et al. 2013).

In still another pair of studies, led by psychologist Dan Johnson, researchers had some people read part of a novel about a Muslim woman. Other participants did not read the story. Afterward, the people who read the story showed a lower amount of bias and less stereotyping in response to photos of people from various cultural backgrounds. Reporting on the findings, the researchers said, “There is growing evidence that just reading a story engages many of the same neural networks involved in empathy” (Jacobs 2014; Johnson, Huffman, and Jasper 2014).

A story that creates empathy and releases oxytocin has another benefit too. It not only helps people be more compassionate, charitable, and trustworthy; it can also help people notice and understand social cues better (Firth 2015). This is another goal of SEL: to help children recognize and understand how to interact socially with others.

As a teacher, I am inspired and motivated by this research showing so vividly that a good story can set the stage for behavior change. You can help your students grow emotionally, build social skills, and strengthen positive character traits through good storytelling.

WHAT IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

We know that stories can help direct and strengthen SEL, as well as character education and academic learning. But what exactly *is* SEL? A good definition comes from CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning): “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL 2019, “What is SEL?”).

Psychologist Daniel Goleman sums up the far-reaching importance of these skills, saying, “If your emotional abilities aren’t in hand, if you don’t have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can’t have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far” (Treher, Piltz, and Jacobs 2011). In fact, research shows that most employers value emotional intelligence over other traits, including IQ (Ovans 2015; Barker 2017). The good news? Children and adults can learn, strengthen, and refine these skills.

The history of teaching social and emotional skills goes back at least as far as Plato’s *Republic*. Plato’s philosophy and vision for education included “good character.” Along the historical path, many other educators and researchers have promoted teaching positive character and behavior, and modern education still involves teaching more than academic skills.

In the United States, federal policy has begun to include social and emotional and behavioral factors into educational accountability metrics, including through the 2015 Every Student Succeeds



4 Social Emotional Stories

Act (ESSA), and as part of school climate initiatives, anti-bullying work, and positive behavior programs.

CASEL is a leader in the SEL movement, having launched an initiative to support states as they develop policies, standards, and guidelines for SEL in schools. The organization identifies the following domains or competencies of growth within SEL (CASEL 2019, “Core SEL Competencies” and “Overview of SEL”). (I have elaborated on their descriptions.) The lessons and stories in this book will help you use stories to build each of these domains:

🌿 **Self-awareness:** Understand personal feelings and the vocabulary of emotions; recognize emotions as they happen; understand and

accept emotions, beliefs, and behavior patterns; develop self-confidence; understand personal strengths and weaknesses; create inner peace

🌿 **Self-management:** Develop skills for relaxing and coping; develop self-motivation; increase self-regulation and self-control of personal behavior, including organization and goal-setting; understand and grow in trustworthiness and adaptability; maintain healthy habits

🌿 **Social awareness:** Understand non-verbal communication and social cues from others; develop positive views of others; develop empathy; understand the emotional needs of others; serve others

THE SCOPE OF SEL

Exploring CASEL’s domains and competencies illuminates how fundamental these skills are, as well as how much they align with other areas of education, and prompts many of us to reflect on how we teach these concepts. For example, we can teach students about the idea of respect through a self-contained lesson on respecting others. But respect develops more deeply in children when they also learn to accept and respect themselves. Further, when children truly grasp respect, they also better understand other people and their feelings, and in turn they can begin to see how showing respect and kindness to others develops and strengthens friendships.

And SEL is anything but a stand-alone initiative. Some people view it as overlapping with character education, for instance. CASEL describes character education as aligning with SEL. Still others consider character education an extension of SEL. It can get confusing! In my view, character education promotes behaviors and traits such as moral sensitivity, ethical reasoning, and basic positive character, while SEL addresses the *core* of behavior. It is the social emotional backbone that supports and strengthens the individual character traits and actions that can extend from it.

It’s also worth noting that the umbrella of SEL encompasses many other skills and benefits. A range of valuable programs, curricular goals, and educational initiatives are involved in developing social and emotional learning, including:

- character education
- non-cognitive skills and development
- twenty-first-century skills
- service learning
- bullying prevention
- conflict resolution
- social skills training
- growth mindset
- resilience and grit



This book will give you new ways of incorporating SEL every day.

- 👁️ **Relationship skills:** Learn communication skills, listening, and understanding; develop inspiring leadership skills; learn conflict management skills; build bonds with others; learn teamwork and collaboration skills; help others develop skills
- 👁️ **Responsible decision-making:** Solve problems; make positive choices; analyze and evaluate choices; reflect on past decisions; behave ethically and responsibly

At the beginning of each lesson you'll find a list of key words and phrases showing ways to connect individual traits, emotions, or behaviors to each of these five CASEL competencies or domains. You will notice that most or even all of the words and phrases listed could be placed in other domains as well, and you will also surely think of additional

traits, emotions, and behaviors that would fit into these domains and have connections to the lesson and story. These lists of key words are simply a starting point, intended to suggest ways of inspiring positive SEL growth through the stories.

You probably already have ideas and approaches for integrating core SEL skills into curricular areas. I hope this book will expand on the strategies you have and give you new ways of incorporating SEL every day through inspiring stories. As professors Joseph E. Zins and Maurice J. Elias have put it, SEL is “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that clearly are essential for all students” (Zins and Elias 2006). Young people need these skills to navigate successfully through the choices and challenges of life.

HOW MANY EMOTIONS DO WE HAVE?

In the 1600s, René Descartes said that humans have only six primary emotions. If you watched the movie *Inside Out*, you might think that there are only five: joy, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. However, recent thought identifies far more emotions, with one study identifying twenty-seven distinct emotions and other sources theorizing that the number of secondary emotions could be in the hundreds or even thousands (Anwar 2017).

In fact, many emotions are similar shades of another emotion—happiness and joy, sadness and grief, anticipation and surprise. They are slightly different. This book will show that stories can unleash many emotions that can motivate social and emotional growth in children so that they can respond with positive behavior.

WHY USE STORIES ABOUT PLANTS AND ANIMALS?

Clearly, stories are a powerful tool for developing social and emotional skills. And clearly, social and emotional skills are crucial to healthy, happy, and successful lives, for both children and adults. But why focus on stories about plants and animals, specifically, in teaching these skills?

Stories from nature can be particularly powerful and non-threatening to young listeners and readers. One reason for this is that most kids enjoy nature and are drawn to stories about animals and plants. Additionally, contact with nature can promote children's mental, emotional, and social health. Research has shown that hands-on contact with nature can help improve children's self-esteem, their engagement with school, and their sense of empowerment (Maller 2009). While the stories and lessons in this book cannot serve as a substitute for this direct



Stories are a powerful tool for developing social and emotional skills. And social and emotional skills are crucial to healthy, happy, and successful lives.

contact, they *can* draw on that fundamental connection that humans feel with the natural world.

Just as important, using stories about plants and animals—rather than about humans—provides a unique benefit. When a story is powerful or painful, nature is a safe distance from children. They do not feel in competition with a dog or a tree, as they can feel when presented with comparisons to people. Nature can illuminate and explore important lessons and ideas without pointing a finger at children or leading to feelings of inferiority, shame, or guilt.

For example, suppose you were to consider the dependability of two students. Sasha always remembers to do her homework. Nick can't seem to remember to take his assignments home. If you compare the two children with the intention of encouraging Nick to become dependable, Nick is more likely to feel embarrassed and hurt than encouraged or motivated. He may also feel resentment toward Sasha. He might feel attacked or view the comparison as unfair. Nick's thought process can get sidetracked by his resentment, hurt feelings, and anger. Meanwhile, your comparison gets ignored. The opportunity for helping Nick to develop dependability and responsibility—which, in turn, are social emotional skills of self-management—may be lost.

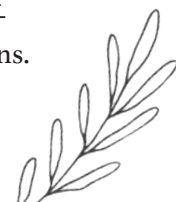
Nature, however, offers that reassuring sense of separation from human behavior. If a teacher or parent had read Nick the story "Dedicated Dogs" in lesson 10, he might have grasped the value of dependability demonstrated by dogs without feeling threatened by it. Nick may also have found the story to be emotionally moving or resonant. And through the related discussion and activities, Nick could gain a deeper understanding of responsibility and its importance. In the process, his brain could begin building a new neural pathway toward self-management and being more dependable.

Stories from nature allow us to teach social skills, including by highlighting characters who break the rules and whose actions—and their consequences—communicate important messages and lessons. We can see this in folk tales such as *Anansi the Spider*, stories like *Little Red Riding Hood*, and series such as *The Berenstain Bears*. Another example of a familiar and inspiring animal story is Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*. It resonates with anyone who has ever been left out, teased, or lonely—which is just about all of us. Hearing this story, children can feel empathy for the misjudged ugly duckling. It can create feelings of respect and appreciation for those who are different. And when the duck discovers he is a beautiful swan, it gives hope to everyone that when we discover our own identity, we can also become beautiful.

Reinforcement and Repetition of Stories Can Foster Positive Change

When any story, behavior, thought pattern, or message is repeated frequently enough, the brain's neurons create a pathway—and a habit. Over time, the habit seems easier and more natural. It's easy to understand this process through an analogy: Have you ever watched children make a sled run in the snow? If the hill isn't very steep, they first have to make the snow slick enough so that the sleds will slide down easily. Otherwise, they will get stuck in the snow. Children pull their sleds down the same path over and over again. Eventually, the repeated process creates a slippery surface for sledding.

When you use the lessons and stories in this book, you help remind students of how their behavior affects others—and vice versa. Children gain perspective of and empathy for the feelings of others. They begin to improve their own self-regulation, creating new pathways in their brains.



And as they repeatedly hear and discuss these stories, their thoughts and emotions can travel those pathways more quickly, like that slippery sled path. They begin to create positive emotional and social habits. Those habits can be further developed through stories in several ways:

- 👁️ **Attention:** Stories have the potential to grab students' attention immediately, engaging their brains on many levels.
- 👁️ **Participation:** When students participate vicariously in what is happening in a story, the brain is more deeply engaged in a way that rivals the level of engagement that would take place in a real-life experience.
- 👁️ **Emotion:** Stories can release emotion in children as they feel empathy, curiosity, sadness, and other emotions for the characters. For example, lesson 4, about the bristlecone pine tree, can help students feel empathy for the tree's struggle to survive. It can speak to a kid who is struggling with math, with reading, or with finding a friend. Children can see that the tree's struggle has made it strong. They can be encouraged to understand that doing difficult things requires courage and inner strength.
- 👁️ **Change:** Emotions can motivate change and growth in behavior and beyond far better than rules and lectures. For example, children could be reminded of lesson 6 and the story "Creeping Coconut Crabs" to help them keep trying when things are hard, and they can grow in resilience and perseverance. Repetition helps build new habits. Slowly but surely the pathways form in the brain, and change can come.

In your work with children, you have the chance to make a big difference. You can help shape the kinds of people your young students become. *Social Emotional Stories* gives you simple, effective ways to help kids to grow both socially and emotionally through storytelling. They can learn how to be more aware of their own personal feelings and those of others. They can learn to recognize problems and make better decisions and even show positive leadership.

WHAT IS A STORY?

For this book's purposes, the definition of a story is a narrative that is true or fiction, legend or biographic, written or in visual or audio format. It can be prose or verse, short or long. It will usually have a dramatic arc, including a hook to catch attention, a setting, plot, conflict, and a resolution of that conflict. It will aim to inspire empathy, curiosity, or other emotions that can that motivate behavior and positive growth.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each of the twenty-four lessons in this book is centered on a story that explores the characteristics and qualities of a fascinating animal or plant. You don't have to use these lessons or stories in any order. You can choose one that relates to something else your class is studying, one that includes a social or emotional idea, skill, or trait you want to address, or simply one that sounds especially interesting. As discussed earlier, each lesson opens with a list of key words and concepts tied to the story's ideas, broken down into the five SEL domains. You can also explore the Key Word Reference Charts that begin on page 16, which offer a quick overview of which lessons explore specific themes.

When you've chosen a lesson, read the story to familiarize yourself with it before using it in class. If you think that some of the vocabulary may be challenging for your students, see the glossary for kid-friendly definitions. You can tell the story animatedly as they listen. Telling the story usually has a greater emotional impact on the students. But you can also choose to pass it out and read it aloud. After you have presented the story, students can also read it themselves or as a group. If you like, display the picture of the lesson's subject on an interactive whiteboard or other surface. (All pictures are in the digital content. See page 168 for download instructions.)

Students may surprise you with the intuitive comments and connections they make on their own.

Accompanying each story is a list of discussion questions that will help your students make connections between the animals and plants explored in the lesson and SEL topics—human character traits, emotions, and relationships. Keep in mind that these questions are simply jumping-off points. Feel free to create your own! Similarly, the sample answers following each question are just to get you started. Your students may surprise you with the intuitive comments and connections they make on their own.

Each story is also paired with several activities specifically related to the lesson's SEL focus areas and to its animal or plant. These activities will help you engage your students in deeper exploration. Most require only minimal preparation and basic materials, and many include prepared handouts, which you will also find in the digital content. These activities can be adapted to work with kids of different ages, interests, abilities, and needs. You know your group best. Do what works for you.

Similarly, you can find creative and natural ways to work these lessons into your day. One option is to use one lesson per week in ten- to fifteen-minute blocks each day. For instance, you could read the story on a Monday, do discussion activities Tuesday through Thursday, and conduct review and reflection on Friday. You are the expert on what will be most effective in your classroom.

If you want to take a lesson even further, turn to Jump-Start Lessons for Social and Emotional Learning on page 13. There you'll find descriptions of hands-on activities that can be used in connection with any of the book's stories. And in the section Integrating This Book's Lessons and Stories Across Subject Areas on page 9, you'll find a sample story followed by interdisciplinary examples of how

to integrate story across subject areas. Additionally, if you are comfortable embracing dramatic storytelling, you'll find tips in the following section for delivering stories. I invite you to look at this book as a toolbox of stories and lessons that will help you integrate SEL in an inspiring and exciting way.

Hints for Stronger Storytelling

Storytelling provides a springboard that can lead to discussions, activities, problem-solving, and behavior change in developing social and emotional growth. You are probably well acquainted with storytelling, and you might already be a pro. But if you choose to deliver stories aloud to your students, the following tips may be helpful. And remember: Good storytelling takes practice, so be patient with yourself. When you grow comfortable with telling stories, it will become natural, and you will enjoy the power of storytelling.

- ☞ Become familiar with your story ahead of time. You could write a few words on a slip of paper to remind you of important parts of the story. Then you can peek down at the paper if you need a cue. As you learn the story, it will become easier to repeat it without any notes.
- ☞ Stories do not need to be memorized, and you don't have to use the exact same words every time you tell a story. In fact, it is better if you don't. You might trip over your tongue trying to remember exact words, or it may sound robotic. Instead, focus on delivering the content and the message rather than a script.
- ☞ Practice telling the story to a kind person—or a mirror. The mirror won't talk back, but it will mimic what you do and help you refine your skills.
- ☞ Create a story from your personal life. Your story will be stronger if it has emotional impact. It can create understanding for children to learn to manage their emotions better and to set goals to achieve benchmarks.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL NOT DO

This book offers you hands-on, practical ways to combine storytelling and SEL. But it does not attempt to cover all challenging situations with a story. And it does not indicate that stories are the only way to teach SEL. Additionally, if you have students who struggle with significant challenges to their mental or emotional health, those issues are beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, stories have the potential to reach any and all children in powerful ways, gaining their attention and encouraging such feelings as empathy, curiosity, loyalty, or cooperation.

- 👁️ Be animated in your facial expressions and physical gestures. Open your eyes wide for dramatic surprise. Move about and use the space you have. Use visuals, if you want to, but you can tell your story without them.
- 👁️ Change your voice level and pitch. See the power of suddenly speaking softly. Build tension as you slowly speak louder. Occasionally use a sudden loud burst to add drama. Interject silences and pauses.
- 👁️ Use different character voices if you can.
- 👁️ Employ metaphors to spark critical and creative thinking.
- 👁️ Use language that fires up the senses: the sight of crystalline raindrops dripping off leaves; the smell of fresh cedar; the creamy taste of chocolate milk; the faint sound of footsteps; the feeling of touching a prickly cactus. Engaging the senses helps engage the brain and set the stage for empathy and growth. And remember, empathy is key. As psychologist Perry Firth has written, “War has built empires, but it is empathy and love that have sustained the human species.”

INTEGRATING THIS BOOK'S LESSONS AND STORIES ACROSS SUBJECT AREAS

Stories can serve as “connective tissue” that helps tie together curricular areas and SEL. A good story, told well, might be used to introduce a unit of history, generate an art project, motivate emotions of courage or empathy, spark problem-solving, teach the use of metaphors, build self-confidence, or encourage patience. You get the idea!

To show you what I mean in more detail, what follows is an example of a legend in which a spider becomes a hero. After, you’ll find ways you might integrate this story and its ideas across multiple academic subjects and also incorporate SEL concepts. As you read this book’s stories with your students, keep these ideas in mind. They can be used across all the subjects and SEL domains you teach.

Robert the Bruce and the Spider

A great military leader by the name of Robert the Bruce lay hidden on a bed of straw in a cold, damp hut where he hoped his enemies would not find him. The year was 1306, and Bruce rightfully should have been the king of Scotland. But there was no Scotland, and he was no king. Instead, he was on the verge of defeat after a long fight against England’s armies.

Bruce had gathered an army of his own to fight for Scottish independence from England. Their greatest wish was to become their own nation. But England’s soldiers had defeated Bruce and his tattered army six times. Bruce’s castle had been sacked, his brother executed, and his wife imprisoned. Bruce and his followers were nearly ready to throw down their weapons and give up their freedom.

As the discouraged Bruce lay in that cave, with wind howling outside, he saw a spider swinging from a web. Bruce watched the spider try to attach its web to the wall on the other side of the bed. Six times the spider failed in its wobbly attempts.

Bruce thought, “My soldiers and I have been defeated six times too. Now if this spider fails on its seventh try, I too shall give up the fight for Scotland.”

Bruce watched closely. The spider swung toward the wall again with all its tiny strength. And to Bruce’s surprise, on the seventh try, the spider reached the wall and finally connected its web. Bruce wanted to cheer. His attitude of defeat began to lift. He jumped up from the bed of straw and resolved to try again.

The spider’s action rallied Bruce from his discouragement. Bruce rallied his troops. It wasn’t easy, but ultimately, they won Scottish independence, and Bruce became king of Scotland. This story of one small spider—part truth, part legend—remains an inspiration to all who seek the courage to not give up.

Interdisciplinary Connections with the Story

In this section you’ll find examples of how you can use a story from nature—in this case, “Robert the Bruce and the Spider”—to create an interdisciplinary unit for your class or grade level, or even a whole school. These activity and discussion ideas are broken down by subject area, and within each subject area you’ll also find specific ideas for connecting SEL themes to discussion of the story. Two domains are explored in each area below, but as you use the stories and lessons in the book, you might discover that you can connect all domains to each story.

Language Arts

- 👁️ Invite your group to create metaphors or similes about spiders.
- 👁️ Discuss how facing challenges can sometimes help us find courage and resolve, as in the story of Robert the Bruce and the spider. Ask children to write or tell stories about times when they showed courage in their own lives. Did they ever do something that was frightening or hard? Did they get stronger by doing it? Did they feel discouraged like Robert the Bruce?

👁️ Make SEL connections:

- **Social awareness:** Children can feel empathy for Bruce, his tattered soldiers—maybe even the spider. They could write stories or poems from the perspective of one of these characters.
- **Relationship skills:** Discuss the inspiring leadership of Robert the Bruce and his courage to not give up. You might also discuss the importance of teamwork in solving problems. Ask children to discuss other stories that share these themes.

Math

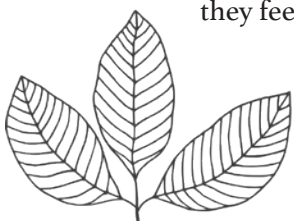
👁️ Select students to conduct a survey of your class, grade level, school, or other group. The survey might seek to learn how many people are afraid of spiders, and how afraid (for example, 1. Very afraid; 2. Somewhat afraid; 3. Not afraid at all). Guide students in collecting the results and making a graph with percentages, perhaps also gathering data on other characteristics, such as age or gender. Discuss the findings.

👁️ Make SEL connections:

- **Self-awareness:** What did the survey help children learn about the fear of spiders? Is it common? Does it seem to be related to age or other factors?
- **Relationship skills:** Ask the children to work in small groups to discuss the survey results. If applicable to your group, allow children who have learned how to calculate percentages to explain the idea to their group members. If you like, you could reconvene the large group to discuss the importance of clear communication and attentive listening.

Science and Technology

- 👁️ Help students investigate how spiders spin their webs. You can look for information in print and online, and you may want to show students videos of the web-building process.
- 👁️ As a group, explore and discuss inventions that have been inspired by spiders and their webs.



Examples include liquid wire, spiderweb glass, sound-proof metamaterial, and synthetic spider silk for use in textiles including bulletproof vests, and more.

☞ Make SEL connections:

- **Self-awareness:** Talk as a group about how science and technology depend on imagination. The imagination can help us discover new solutions, cures, inventions, and even games. From Robert the Bruce to innovative scientists, everyone has an imagination that helps them solve problems. We can develop our imaginations in many ways, such as drawing, writing, singing, playing, listening, and letting our thoughts wander through ideas.
- **Relationship skills:** To defeat England's armies, Robert the Bruce and his soldiers had to demonstrate a lot of teamwork. With your group, explore the idea that scientists also have to work together to invent things. Ask questions to spark discussion: "How do you think it helps scientists to work in teams, listen to each other, and learn to communicate clearly?" "How do scientists consider everyone's ideas and perspectives and then choose the best ones to explore?"

Social Studies

- ☞ A tiny spider inspired an army. What other small things or small actions have made a difference in history, in your community, or in society?
- ☞ Ask kids whether they think anyone can contribute if they summon up the courage. What are examples of this in history?
- ☞ Make SEL connections:
 - **Self-management:** Discuss with the children what to do with their emotions. Most might decide they just try to keep a respectful distance from spiders.
 - **Responsible decision-making:** Robert the Bruce made the courageous decision to keep fighting for his nation. Guide children through some steps for making courageous and

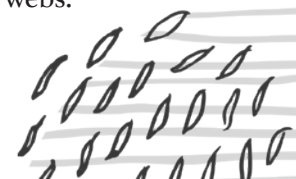
positive choices, such as brainstorming possible ideas; researching those ideas; choosing one; making a plan and carrying it out; reflecting and evaluating how it went in order to learn new approaches for the next decision.

Physical Education

- ☞ What can the tiny spider's determination teach us about physical ability? What helps a young person perform well in sports? Is it size? What might be the most important qualities to develop to make contributions in sports?
- ☞ Invite students to discuss or write about this statement and what it means to them in the context of physical education: "Perseverance pays off."
- ☞ How do you find courage to not give up in a losing game?
- ☞ Make SEL connections:
 - **Self-management:** Robert the Bruce and the spider both had to bounce back from defeat. Talk with students about how this kind of resilience is important in sports and beyond. How do they get back up after being knocked down? How do they cope with defeat and disappointment? How do they control their emotions when losing a game or contest?
 - **Social Awareness:** Robert the Bruce had to develop skills in communicating with his soldiers and understanding how they felt in order to keep their support. In what ways do you communicate on a team while playing a sport? How can you read what your teammates are thinking and feeling?

Art

- ☞ Invite children to find photographs of various spiders and insects (printed from online sources, cut out of magazines, or copied from books) and make a collage out of the photos.
- ☞ Have kids create spider-shaped crafts using materials such as pom poms, paper, craft straws, googly eyes, and more. They could even attach their creations to paper webs.



“You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone’s soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words. That is your role, your gift.”

—Erin Morgenstern

👁️ Make SEL connections:

- **Self-management:** Ask children to show their spider creations or other artwork to the group. They might talk about what their art shows or explain what it means to them. Having the courage to share your gifts without embarrassment or shyness can help develop self-confidence and self-management.
- **Relationship skills:** Work as teams to create an art mural or collage together depicting the story of Robert the Bruce and the spider. Remember that everyone contributes to a beautiful mural. It is important for children to listen to each other’s ideas so they can work together on creating the mural or collage.

Music

👁️ There are many children’s songs about spiders, from “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” to “A Spider on the Floor” by Raffi to “Spunk the Spider”—another spider that didn’t give up (you can find music and lyrics here: songsforteaching.com/animalsongs/spunkthespider.php). Teach students one of these songs, or have them write their own.

👁️ Make SEL connections:

- **Self-awareness:** Talk about how children felt individually when they heard songs about spiders. Were they frightened? Did they laugh and think it was funny? Help them explore how recognizing and accepting our emotions is part of self-awareness, and discuss the idea that music can help us feel emotions.
- **Responsible decision-making:** Robert the Bruce made a decision to learn from the

spider’s perseverance, despite the many differences between him and the spider. Even when we feel that we are different from the people around us, we can decide to sing together. We can create more beautiful music as a chorus. We can decide to listen to each other’s voices so that we blend together in harmony. We can choose to enrich our lives and the lives of others—through our songs and through our actions.

A FINAL WORD

I would love to hear how *Social Emotional Stories* works for you and your students. Please feel free to share your experiences by emailing me at help4kids@freespirit.com, or by writing to me in care of the following address:

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Best wishes to you,
Barbara A. Lewis



JUMP-START LESSONS FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING



You can use these activities with any of the lessons or stories in this book. These activities will help children become more aware of their feelings and emotions, which in turn can help them manage those feelings better. They also can help children understand, communicate with, and empathize with others; strengthen positive habits; make productive decisions; and engage in discussion and reflection. Getting kids active and engaged through these activities can boost blood flow to the brain, bolster your classroom community, and build SEL skills all at the same time.



Nature is a powerful teaching tool—and it is always near! Most children love to touch, hear, smell, and see the outside world. They relate to weather, animals, plants, and even dirt. Take kids outside and ask them to look at the clouds above. What animals and plants do they see in the clouds? Seeing something within something else is a beginning step in understanding different perspectives. Ask kids to draw the outlines of clouds and, within these outlines, to draw what they see in the clouds. If you can't go outside, you can do this activity by displaying photographs of clouds on a projector or interactive whiteboard.

Focus on feelings. Pair up students and ask them to sit facing their partners, without talking. When everyone is still and quiet, invite kids to try to figure out how their partners are feeling, just by looking closely at their faces, posture, and so forth. Practice in becoming a thoughtful observer is an important step in learning to read social cues and in developing empathy.

Fill a jar with slips of paper, on each of which is written an emotion. Pair up students and have one member of each pair draw a slip without showing what it says to the partner. These students will then act as though they are feeling that emotion, while the partners try to guess it. This helps students learn to watch for subtle signs of different emotions and to empathize with others.

Teach children that communication goes beyond our words. Discuss how voice, body language, and facial expressions can change the meaning of what we're saying. We might communicate one thing with our tone of voice while our actions communicate the opposite meaning. Students will see the difference when role-playing the examples below. You can add many more phrases and have them role-play those as well. If needed, you can demonstrate first and then have children try.

👁️ **Words:** "I really like you."

Nonverbal communication: First, say this with a loud, sarcastic voice and a sneering expression. Wiggle your hands back and forth in a mocking way. Next, say the same sentence with a kind voice, a smile, and a thumbs-up gesture.

👁️ **Words:** "I'm so happy!"

Nonverbal communication: First, say this with a loud, mad voice, a frowning or sad face, and drooped or hunched shoulders. Next, say the same sentence with a cheerful voice and a huge smile while clapping your hands.

What do students notice about each example?

