

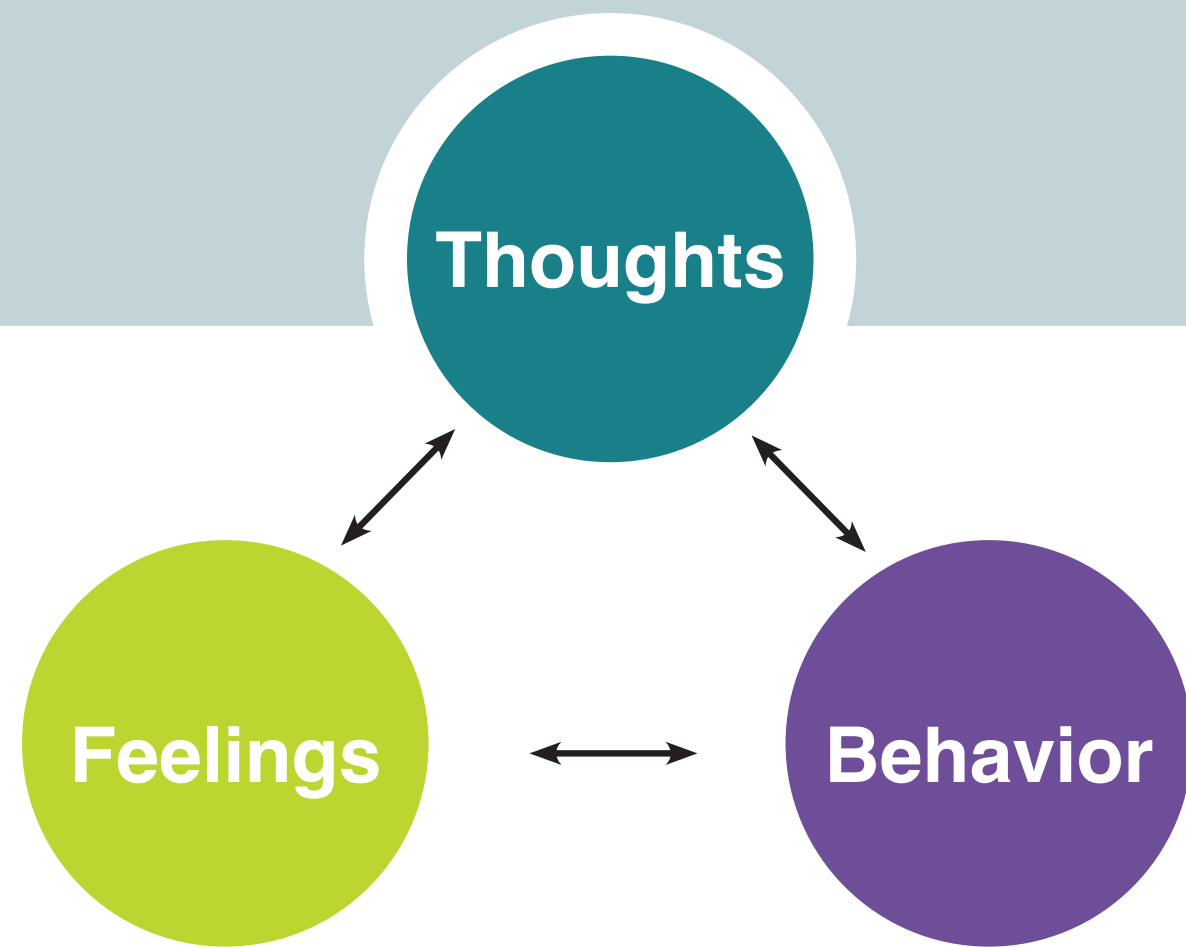
eMAGAZINE Vision

VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS



Health and Well-being

ISSUE 8
Winter
2020



The Langley School: SEL In Action

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At The Langley School in McLean, VA, we know that social-emotional learning: 1) furthers students' academic achievement, 2) builds students' resilience, adaptability, and authenticity, and 3) prepares students to flourish in a diverse and global environment. As such, we offer a comprehensive Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program that works in tandem with the academic program and Langley's core values to foster students' emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and health and wellness. The Langley School's custom-built SEL program is a three-pronged program that incorporates foundational knowledge, skills, and strategies to help our students develop strong skills in emotion awareness and management, a deep understanding of their own and others' identities, an appreciation of diversity with a focus on equity and inclusion, an ability to respond to social injustice, and a solid foundation in understanding the brain, body, and relationships in order to make healthy decisions.

The Langley School's SEL program is taught across our school, which spans preschool through eighth grade. In our Primary and Lower School divisions, SEL lessons are taught by our teachers and counseling team and are woven into morning meeting discussions, curricular lessons, and daily practices. Starting in

fifth grade, students participate in a SEL class once per seven-day cycle, which allows us to more deeply cover topics related to emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and health and wellness. As we have built The Langley School's curriculum, we have relied heavily on research out of the fields of education, psychology, child development, health, and human development and sexuality in order to ensure that we are including skills and knowledge known to predict future success.

As a clinical psychologist, I have utilized my own clinical background to think about the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills and techniques that we know foster healthy decision making. For example, in my sixth-grade SEL class, I have built a unit centered around the cognitive triangle, which visually depicts the connection between our thoughts, our feelings, and our behavior. The cognitive triangle, which provides the framework for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, is a simple, yet powerful, tool that is relevant outside of the therapeutic context given our tendencies as humans to misinterpret and make assumptions when situations are unclear. Furthermore, the cognitive triangle provides an important set of tools that allows individuals to challenge negative thoughts that over time can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression.



In my sixth-grade SEL class, students first learn how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors influence one another and how changing one can dramatically change the consequences of events. Students also learn about a variety of unhelpful thinking styles, otherwise known as assumptions or misinterpretations, that often occur following ambiguous situations. Common unhelpful thinking styles include mind reading (imagining you know what someone else is thinking) and catastrophizing (imagining the worst case scenario). Students learn about these various thinking styles and then engage in a variety of role plays to bring them to life. We also spend time watching video clips from movies such as "Inside Out" and identifying the presence of unhelpful thinking styles. Then, we learn how to challenge these types of thinking styles, including examining the evidence and rating the likelihood of the outcome actually occurring. We practice challenging thoughts through role plays and additional video clips. Lastly, students practice reframing their unhelpful thoughts by generating more realistic (and generally more positive) ones.

I recently sought the reflections of a number of my sixth-grade students about the cognitive triangle unit. Here is what a few of them had to say:

"This skill could be used if I'm feeling like I'm not good enough or I'm doing the mind-reading thinking error, or any other error. I know how to stop myself from thinking that way and can redirect my thought process."

"I think that it was really useful to learn about different strategies for reforming unhelpful thoughts. I think that I will also be able to use that in my daily life."

"I have learned how to get rid of negative thoughts. It helps me focus before tests and when I have a negative thought, I can get rid of it. When I have a negative thought, not only can I identify it, I can challenge the thought and it usually goes away."

My hope is that this set of cognitive skills will provide our students with a healthy framework with which to deal with the abundance of thoughts that come up during stressful situations, such as taking tests or receiving a lower than expected grade, as well as when navigating complex social situations and dealing with conflict.

If you are interested in doing a similar lesson with your middle schoolers, here are two resources that I've found especially helpful:

Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens: A Workbook To Break The Nine Thought Habits That Are Holding You Back by Mary Karapetian Alvord and Anne McGrath

The Worry Workbook for Teens: Effective CBT Strategies To Break The Cycle of Worry & Anxiety by Jamie Micco