

# Why Should I Look for Schools That Develop Children Socially and Emotionally?

Categories: Uncategorized

Last year, when I wrote the below post, my daughter was in her last year of preschool. I was in the throes of the school search, touring as many of the SFUSD public schools as my schedule would allow, weighing the pros and cons of each school, and trying to rank the schools in a way that would position us well in the city-wide lottery.

The lottery was quite a roller coaster—we got *none* of the schools we listed in either the first or second round. (That’s fourteen schools!). In the end, though, good fortune reigned. Lila was placed in a school that meets both our quality standards and logistical requirements. Most importantly, it’s a school that places an emphasis on social and emotional learning. In fact, her new school is even a Caring School Community (CSC) school! (See more about CSC below.)

I want to encourage this year’s wave of overwhelmed parents to weight the quality of the school community heavily in the equation when evaluating schools, for reasons I describe in more detail below. We all want our children to have the kind of quality education that will open every door of opportunity for them. A quality education, though, doesn’t just promote academic achievement; it helps guide children along the path to responsible, compassionate citizenship.

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I am a San Francisco parent of a prospective Kindergartener, an elementary school teacher, and a curriculum developer for a non-profit organization called Developmental Studies Center. Like most of you, I have spent a lot of time touring elementary schools. I have noticed that many parents look at test scores, facilities, program offerings (i.e., language or art programs), and principal leadership to judge the quality of a school. While these school characteristics are important, I encourage parents to also consider the school environment and how it fosters children’s social and emotional development. This is equally as important.

Touring schools has made me reflect upon what kind of school environment I want for my daughter and how that environment can help her develop into the kind of person I hope she will become. I would like my daughter to treat others in a respectful, fair, and caring way and take responsibility for herself. I also believe that if my daughter feels happy, supported, safe, and engaged in school and learns to work well with others, she will feel comfortable enough to ask questions, explore new ideas, and learn more deeply.

I am looking for schools that foster a sense of community and teach children these values. Research shows that creating a strong sense of community at school increases students’ academic performance and has a positive influence on students’ behavior. When students are in caring school communities, they are more likely to like school, enjoy challenging learning activities, and help others. In addition, data from a study on adolescent health found that students’ sense of connectedness to school (and family) were linked to a decrease in a range of problem behaviors, including the use of alcohol, violent behavior, emotional distress, and early sexual activity.

When I walk into the classrooms on school tours, I observe how the teachers treat the students (teachers must model respect and

kindness for students to act in these ways) and how happy and engaged the students are in their work. I look to see if children are working collaboratively, as this fosters a genuine interest in and concern for others. I ask about programs the schools have to promote caring classroom and school communities and students' social and emotional development. Fortunately, many of the SFUSD schools implement either the *Tribes Learning Community*® or Caring School Community programs. Both of these programs help create a positive classroom and school environment. My nonprofit employer developed the Caring School Community program.

Recently, as part of my work, I had the opportunity to observe a class-meeting lesson in a kindergarten classroom at Sunnyside Elementary School in San Francisco. In class meetings, children get to know each other, discuss issues, identify and solve problems, and make decisions that affect classroom climate. The teacher was very kind and caring and also had excellent classroom management. The children seemed very happy and eager to participate. The teacher engaged the children in authentic discussion with each other as they talked about how to act for substitute teachers. Talking about how to treat substitute teachers and committing to positive, helpful behaviors prevents problems and makes the classroom run more smoothly when the regular teacher is absent. Ultimately, a child who discusses and learns why she should treat everyone respectfully (including substitute teachers) is beginning to develop into the kind of person I hope my daughter will become—a good, caring, and responsible one.