Introduction to Social Awareness

Definition, components, examples by age and five practices for the week

For: Educators, families and students in grades 6-12

Definition

Social awareness is the ability to understand other people's perspectives, feel empathy and compassion for them, recognize the social norms of different settings, and appreciate people from backgrounds and cultures unlike your own.

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, lists it as one of five core competencies of social and emotional learning, alongside self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. CASEL's definition centers on the abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts, and it extends to feeling compassion, understanding historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognizing family, school and community resources.

In plain words: pay accurate attention to the people around you and the setting you are in, and let what you notice shape what you do.

Four components

Component	Meaning	Looks like
Perspective-taking	Working out what someone else knows, wants or believes, and why	"He grabbed it because he thought it was his turn."
Empathy and compassion	Sensing another's feeling and being moved to help	Noticing a classmate is upset and making room for them
Recognizing norms and situations	Reading what a setting expects, and noticing when a norm is unfair	Lowering your voice in the library; pointing out a rule enforced only on some students
Appreciating diversity	Treating difference in background, culture and ability as information, not threat	Asking how a classmate's family does something instead of assuming

Examples by age

Age band	At school	Outside school
Preschool and kindergarten	Notices a classmate is sad and offers a toy or tells the teacher	Understands a sibling who did not see the cookie jar move does not know where it is
Grades 1-2	Waits for a turn to speak because that is the circle-time norm	Thanks a grandparent for a gift without being prompted

Age band	At school	Outside school
Grades 3-5	Explains why a character made a choice the reader disagrees with	Notices a game's rules favor the oldest player and suggests a change
Grades 6-8	Restates a classmate's opposing opinion accurately before giving her own	Shifts tone from a friends' group chat to a message to a coach
Grades 9-12	Identifies how a school policy affects students with jobs or family duties differently	Interviews an older relative and revises an assumption

Social awareness and nearby terms

Term	Relationship
Empathy	One component of social awareness
Self-awareness	The inward-facing partner: knowing your own emotions and values
Social skills or relationship skills	The behaviors that put social awareness into action
Emotional intelligence	A broader popular term; social awareness overlaps with its other-focused parts

How it develops

- The basic ability to understand that other people have their own beliefs and knowledge is typically in place during the preschool years, then grows in range and subtlety for years afterward.
- Learning the norms of new settings never finishes: home, classroom, team, workplace, online spaces.
- Adolescents gain the ability to think about norms as norms, to question them and to notice who they serve.
- Adults build the skill in children by explaining other people's reasons, asking what a character might be thinking, and modeling curiosity toward unfamiliar people.

Five practices for the week

Pick one per day. Each takes under five minutes.

1. **Monday: Predict before you read.** In any text, stop before a character acts. Write what the character knows, wants and will do. Read on and compare.
2. **Tuesday: Restate before you respond.** In one conversation or discussion, say back the other person's view in your own words and check you got it right before giving your own.
3. **Wednesday: Read the room.** Walk into one setting (class, cafeteria, practice, a store) and name three expectations it has that another setting does not. Decide whether each is fair.
4. **Thursday: Notice a strength.** Identify one specific thing a classmate or colleague did well and tell them, with the detail.
5. **Friday: Ask a real question.** Ask someone whose experience differs from yours one open question about it, and listen without planning your reply.

Reflection at the end of the week

- Which practice was hardest? Why?
- What did you notice about someone that you would have missed before?
- Which norm did you decide was unfair, and what would a fairer version be?
- What assumption did you catch yourself making?

For teachers: three quick classroom routines

- Open class with a round in which every voice is heard once.
- Pause shared texts to ask what a character knows and wants before the reveal.
- Close class with: "Who noticed something about someone else today?"

Sources

- CASEL, What Is the CASEL Framework? casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/
- Wellman, Cross and Watson, Meta-analysis of theory-of-mind development, Child Development, 2001: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11405571/
- Full explainer: transformingeducation.org/resources/introduction-to-social-awareness/
- Classroom activities: transformingeducation.org/resources/social-awareness-toolkit/

Source and updates: https://transformingeducation.org/resources/. This document may be copied and shared for non-commercial educational use with attribution.