Social Awareness Strategies

Twelve classroom strategies with steps, grade-band notes and discussion prompts

For: K-12 teachers and counselors

The skill in one paragraph

Social awareness is the ability to understand other people's perspectives, feel empathy and compassion for them, read what a setting expects (and notice when its norms are unfair), and appreciate people from backgrounds unlike your own. CASEL names it as one of five core SEL competencies. The strategies below are built so that perspective-taking is required by the task, not requested by the teacher.

The four components

Component	What the student does
Perspective-taking	Works out what someone else knows, wants or believes, and why
Empathy and compassion	Senses another's feeling and is moved to help
Recognizing norms and situations	Reads what a setting expects; notices when a norm is unfair
Appreciating diversity	Treats difference in background, culture and ability as information, not threat

Twelve strategies

1. Inclusive welcome (all grades, 2 minutes daily) Steps: Open every class with a round in which each voice is heard once: a one-word check-in, a "who else?" poll, or a greeting with eye contact to three classmates. Grade notes: Give K-2 a script ("Good morning, ___"). Let secondary students choose the prompt.

2. Predict the character (all grades) Steps: During any shared text, stop before a character reacts. Ask: What does she know right now? What does she want? What will she do? Read on and compare. Grade notes: Picture books through Shakespeare. With older students, add: What does the reader know that the character does not?

3. Feelings detective (all grades) Steps: Show a photo, wordless page or muted clip. Students name the feeling and the evidence: "Frustrated, because his fists are clenched and he is looking away." Grade notes: Older students examine news photographs and discuss how context changes the reading.

4. Same and different circle (K-2) Steps: Students stand in a circle. Read a light statement ("I have a pet," "I like thunderstorms"). Students step in if true. Ask: Who is in the circle with you? Who is outside? Close with what the class noticed. Grade notes: Never use statements about family hardship.

5. The helping wheel (K-2) Steps: Chart common moments (dropped crayons, sitting alone, crying). For each, brainstorm what the person might feel and two things a classmate could do. Post it and point to it

when the moments happen.

6. Two sides of the story (3-5) Steps: After a conflict in a text or hypothetical, students write the event twice, once from each side, in first person. Underline the sentence in each version the other person most needs to hear. Compare in pairs. Grade notes: Avoid real classroom conflicts until the structure is familiar.

7. Fair or unfair rules audit (3-5) Steps: Students list five rules they live with and sort them: fair, unfair, depends. For each "unfair": who benefits, who loses, what a fairer version would be. Grade notes: Builds the CASEL skill of identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones.

8. Strengths spotting (3-8) Steps: Weekly, each student writes one specific strength noticed in a classmate. Read a selection aloud without names, then return them. Grade notes: Track so every student is named at least twice per term.

9. Switch-side debate (6-8) Steps: Prepare one side of a classroom-appropriate question. Debate five minutes. Switch and argue the other side using at least one point heard from opponents. Debrief: What do you understand about the other side now?

10. Three-stakeholder map (6-12) Steps: For a current event, historical decision or school issue, map what three stakeholders know, want, fear and would say. Groups present one stakeholder they personally disagree with, fairly. Grade notes: Assess accuracy of the representation, not agreement.

11. Structured interview across difference (9-12) Steps: Students interview someone whose experience differs from their own, using prepared open questions. Write a reflection on one assumption the interview changed. Grade notes: Set ground rules on consent, respect and privacy. Students choose their interviewee.

12. Community resources map (9-12) Steps: Groups research supports available to young people locally (tutoring, food assistance, mental health services, recreation) and produce a one-page guide for peers. Grade notes: Addresses the CASEL element of recognizing family, school and community resources. Give it a real audience.

Six-week sequence

Week	Focus	Do
1	Name the skill	Introduce the four components; start the daily inclusive welcome
2	Notice feelings	Feelings detective and predict the character in existing lessons
3	Take perspectives	Two sides, switch-side debate or stakeholder map
4	Read the setting	Fair or unfair audit or a norms discussion
5	Appreciate difference	Same and different, structured interview or a text about unlike experiences

Week	Focus	Do
6	Act on it	Each student chooses one social awareness action for the week and reflects

Discussion prompts

Use the same three after every activity: What did you notice? What surprised you? What would you do differently?

Additional prompts by component:

- Perspective-taking: What did this person know that you did not? What did they want? What would you need to believe to act the way they did?
- Empathy: What might this person be feeling right now? What tells you that? What would help, and how do you know?
- Norms: What does this place expect of you? Who decided? Who does this rule help, and who does it cost?
- Diversity: What is one way your experience differs from this person's? What question would you ask them? What assumption did you catch yourself making?

Observing progress

Rate a few students each week on four indicators (not yet / sometimes / consistently):

- Identifies another person's feeling with evidence
- Restates a view they disagree with accurately
- Adjusts behavior to the setting without prompting
- Includes or supports others without being asked

Pair with a short student self-report at weeks 1 and 6, and track peer conflict referrals monthly. Do not grade empathy itself.

Pitfalls

- Lecturing about kindness instead of running structures that require perspective-taking.
- Forcing students to use their own hardships as material.
- Teaching diversity as foods and holidays rather than as how background shapes experience.
- Confusing agreement with understanding. Assess accuracy.
- Skipping the debrief, which is where the learning happens.

Sources

- CASEL, What Is the CASEL Framework? casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/
- CASEL, SEL 3 Signature Practices: signaturepractices.casel.org
- Full toolkit: 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.