



Best Practices for Realistic Role Play







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The fundamental goal of SEL is to aid children in developing skills that result in positive social and emotional behavior. To this end, the SEL classroom can be a social and emotional ecosystem, or laboratory, where students can learn how to relate to one another and practice making responsible decisions in a real-world context. The classroom provides a safe space to observe and modify responses and behavior. SEL is not an academic subject and lessons are most beneficial when applied throughout the school day as teachable moments arise. Practicing role play in the classroom can help build a supportive environment in which to focus on these teachable moments as they occur.

One of the foundational elements of SEL is building strategies for students to use when navigating emotional situations. For example, students need specific methods to help control and understand strong emotions like anger and fear, however, this is only the first step. Effective role play allows children to go further, by practicing these skills in a safe and supportive environment. By giving students the opportunity to explore these strategies in a low stakes setting, they begin to build confidence in them so that they will be ready to use when needed in daily life.

An SEL program will not be effective if it merely explains the core social and emotional skills. Realistic role play is an essential component of SEL where scenarios are presented in a larger, “real-life” context. Ideally, SEL skills and competencies will be integrated into all school environments. This far more integrative approach represents experiential learning at its best.

In understanding SEL in physiological terms, recognize that knowledge is stored in the frontal cortex of the brain, where reasoning and short-term memory reside. The important skills of responsible decision-making and collaborative problem-solving can be developed there as well. But socialization and emotional behaviors reside deeper in the brain, in the limbic system. In order for SEL to take hold, it must go to the deeper brain, or subconscious, and become automatic.

Consistently incorporating role play in lessons allows students to continually practice new skills and get meaningful feedback. A recent study conducted by Phillippa Lally and published in the European Journal of Social Psychology concluded that it can take a minimum of 66 days to internalize and automatically perform a new skill¹. We know that constant reinforcement of a desired behavior is necessary in establishing a consistent pattern. So what is learned in role play must be repeated at every possible opportunity. Role play can only be truly effective if properly implemented in the classroom.

The following are suggested steps for using role play to teach SEL skills.

STEP 1. Define the Role Play Format

Explain that role play is not a theatrical performance but an engaging classroom activity for discussion and learning about emotions and behavior.

- Decide whether to break students into several groups with different role play scenarios or conduct a single role play in front of the entire class. Breaking students into groups allows more students to participate.
- Decide whether to use the “fishbowl” approach for group role play where a set of students observes and comments on the other student’s role play work. Additionally, the performing students may evaluate their own work, reinforcing what they have learned. For many different suggestions for grouping students, please see the document titled Using Social Learning Structures.

¹ <https://jamesclear.com/new-habit>

STEP 2. Explain The Setting, Characters, and Plot/Situation

Each QuaverSEL lesson includes opportunities for role play with specific information regarding these activities in the printables section.

STEP 2.1 Define the Setting/SEL Skills Needed – Hand Out Printables

- Review examples from the lesson including specific establishing details, such as which characters were involved, setting, and order of events.
- Discuss what the characters involved might have been feeling, and what SEL skills could help them to better cope with the situation.
- Ask students to think about similar incidents that happened in their lives and how they reacted.

STEP 2.2. Choose Students to Play the Characters in The Role Play

- Select volunteers to share when they have experienced a similar situation in the past.
- Make sure students use the names of the characters in the scenario to avoid students feeling personally critiqued.

STEP 2.3 Set the Plot/Dialogue/Explore Proper Responses

- Ask students to discuss how the situation was handled improperly in the past.
- Ask students to suggest ideas for how they would deal with the situation.
- Ask students to discuss any emotions they experienced.

STEP 3. Enact the Role Play

At this point, the actual role-play work begins. It is extremely important that students express emotions when acting out the situation. Encourage students to place themselves in the moment and carefully reflect on the best way to play their role. Remind them that their facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice are all important, and that they should express their feelings with “I” messages. When everyone is ready, continue as follows.

- Call Action to start the role play.
- Call Freeze to stop and discuss as needed.
- Add elements to the plot in order to build the intensity or complexity of the scene.
- Repeat the role play as necessary until students feel satisfied– practice-practice-practice.
- Reenact the scenario with different students.

STEP 4. Discuss How Realistic the Role Play Was

After the role play is finished, allow time for the scene participants to discuss what they learned. Ask if they would feel comfortable repeating what they learned in a similar real life situation. Allow the observing students to discuss what they learned and offer them the opportunity to try role playing the scenario on their own.

STEP 5. Complete the Role Play Rubric

After the role play, discuss and complete the following rubric as a class in order to reflect on the success of the activity.

Role Play Rubric

Role Play Element	Emerging	Proficient	Advanced	Masterful
1. Clear Objectives	No objectives were stated	A few objectives were clearly defined	Most objectives were clearly defined	All objectives were clearly defined
2. Clearly Defined Elements – setting/ characters/plot	None of the role play elements were clearly defined	One of the elements was clearly defined	Two of the elements were clearly defined	All three elements were clearly defined
3. Active Participation	No students participated willingly and enthusiastically	Some students participated willingly and enthusiastically	Most students participated willingly and enthusiastically	All students participated willingly and enthusiastically
4. Effective Performance	No students performed their parts effectively	Some students performed their parts effectively	Most students performed their parts effectively	All students performed their parts effectively
5. Useful Discussion	No useful insights were gained through discussion	The class discussed the outcomes and gained some useful insights	The class discussed the outcomes and gained several useful insights	The class discussed the outcomes and gained many useful insights



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