

What is Whole Child Education?

By Rebecca Bauer & Helen Westmoreland

How do families view success for their child? What kind of people do parents want their children to become? For families all over the country the answer is surprisingly consistent: they want more for their children than high test scores. They want their children to be happy and healthy. They want them to be responsible, respectful, caring members of their communities.

According to research by Learning Heroes, families see schools as important partners in the development of life skills. Over 75% of parents feel it's important that schools have high expectations around social and emotional development. The skills and traits families rated as most important for their children to develop were respect, self-esteem, confidence, problem-solving and social skills.¹

“Whole child education” is an increasingly popular approach that schools are using to ensure students are developing these broader life skills. It creates environments that not only promote children’s academic growth, but also their cognitive, social and emotional, physical, mental and identity development.²

The media, education policymakers and educators may not use the same vocabulary when describing whole child education, as many terms describe similar or overlapping initiatives. Aspects of this approach and related terms include: deeper learning, social and emotional learning, character education, life skills, soft skills and noncognitive skills.

The whole child approach gives children the foundation they need to become well-rounded, healthy individuals, equipped with a solid education and important life skills to help them reach their full potential.

Children’s brains are constantly developing, and learning is a social process, as children absorb information from their surroundings, from family members, teachers and peers.³ It is important for schools to address children’s needs holistically to help them to develop the strategies, skills and mindsets they need to thrive, even when they encounter challenges.



Research shows that whole child education helps students in various ways, when these approaches are grounded in the science of how children learn and develop. Research also shows that when schools offer appropriate learning opportunities and other supports—like access to mentors—children experience greater academic achievement, career success, and enhanced health and well-being overall.⁴

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Learn why a whole child approach to education supports children and their entire communities in the Learning Policy Institute’s report, [“Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success.”](#)

Debunking Misconceptions

The whole child approach to education has been around for several decades but has grown in popularity in recent years. As families have different levels of familiarity with the topic—and with the overwhelming range of terminology—several misconceptions around the whole child approach have emerged.

MYTH *If my child’s school takes a whole child approach to education, they have less time to focus on academic content.*

FACT While it does take time to intentionally build students' life skills, and create a sense of community in the classroom, it does not require sacrificing academics. In fact, research has shown that building students' social and emotional skills is associated with significant academic gains.⁵ Whole child education is not adding an additional subject area, but rather changing the way teachers teach and students learn.⁵ By creating a sense of belonging and empowering students to take ownership of their learning, a whole child approach enables students to thrive academically, while also developing other important life skills.

MYTH *My child will only benefit from the whole child approach during the early childhood and elementary years.*

FACT Creating an environment where children can learn and grow is important at every stage of their development. While many think whole child development is for kindergartners, as middle and high school students begin to face challenging decisions and develop new life skills—like self-awareness, self management and relationship-building—it is more essential than ever. Social and emotional learning interventions are associated with outcomes that are particularly relevant for young adults, such as increased high school and college graduation rates, a decreased likelihood of getting arrested and lower rates of sexually transmitted infections.⁶ A whole child approach offers older students essential opportunities to practice taking risks, making decisions and taking ownership of their learning—all skills they will need in high school and beyond.

MYTH *My child should be learning social and emotional and other life skills through specific programs and experts.*

FACT When it comes to whole child education, there is not one curriculum or program that fits all circumstances. Schools should choose their approach based on their community's needs. Research asserts that there are many components that can help children learn social and emotional skills including explicit instruction, family engagement and opportunities for children to apply what they've learned.⁷ Rather than relying solely on lesson plans specific to develop certain traits—like respect or responsibility—teachers and families should also demonstrate what these traits look like in their everyday actions, and provide opportunities for students to practice these skills. In a school that is committed to the development of the whole child, a school counselor will not be the only person working to develop students' life skills. Instead, whole child development will be an ongoing part of all adults' work with students.

Diversity & Whole Child Education

Cultural differences influence how families and schools address social and emotional learning and life-skill development. For example, classrooms that emphasize individual student success and create competitive learning models may not resonate with students from cultures that place a greater value on collaboration and interdependence.

A successful whole child approach uplifts children, highlights their strengths, efforts and improvements. This approach also provides the resources needed to support their well-being and affirm their identities. What can schools and families do to implement a whole child approach with equity in mind?

- + **See culture differences as assets, rather than challenges.** Use the community's diversity as an opportunity for students to learn about different perspectives and develop greater empathy and understanding.
- + **Facilitate teacher trainings that focus on best practices around racial equity and cultural competence.** Resources are available to guide schools through the process of pursuing whole child development through a racial equity lens. A recent [Aspen Institute report](#) offers several concrete strategies including building on strengths and avoiding stereotypes.
- + **Embrace challenging conversations between families and teachers across racial, ethnic, religious and other differences.** Families may have different views on whole child learning, depending on their own school and life experiences. School communities must foster open communication and facilitate conversations around their educational philosophy and discuss ways to engage that best resonate with all families.

What Does a Whole Child Approach to Education Look Like?

How do you know if this is happening at your child's school? Explore the examples below and visit [ASCD's whole child page](#) for more ideas. If your child's teacher and school community are prioritizing whole child development, they are working to ensure every child is **healthy, safe, engaged, supported** and **challenged**.⁸

A few examples from ASCD's comprehensive framework demonstrate what this looks like in practice:



Healthy

- + The school prioritizes recess and physical education classes to ensure all students get an appropriate amount of exercise and outdoor time each day.
- + The school offers healthy options for meals and snacks and provides education around nutrition.
- + The school has a health education curriculum that addresses the physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions of health.

Safe

- + The physical, social and academic climate of the school is safe for all students and their families.
- + The school provides opportunities for families to learn how to reinforce rules and procedures and help children develop coping skills.

Engaged

- + School staff help children to monitor how they are doing in school by using goal-setting techniques.
- + Teachers provide opportunities for students to collaborate on projects that develop their life skills.
- + The curriculum encourages students to understand not only what they are learning, but also why they are learning it.

Supported

- + The school helps families understand what services are available for their child, teaches them how to advocate for them and welcomes parent participation in their child's learning.
- + The school helps children to develop the vocabulary and skills necessary to identify and express their emotions effectively.
- + The school personalizes learning so that children receive individualized attention and supports.

Challenged

- + The curriculum challenges every student and helps them to develop an understanding of the world around them.
- + The school works with families to determine what success looks like for each child and how education can help the child reach their goals.

Watch the Whole Child Approach to Education in Action



Boosting Engagement With Notices and Wonders. Teachers **engage** students through interactive activities that provide opportunities for critical thinking and collaboration.



Scaffolding Discussion Skills With a Socratic Circle. Teachers **challenge** students to think deeply and develop communications skills by facilitating meaningful conversations around controversial topics.

Learn more about whole child learning by watching more of the "How Learning Happens" video series on [Edutopia.com](#).

Measuring Whole Child Learning

While there is general support for teaching students life skills in school, families begin to worry as soon as there is mention of measuring this type of development. Parents are particularly hesitant for social and emotional learning to be “graded,” and they do not want schools or teachers to overstep their roles or push their personal beliefs.¹

How can schools and families understand the impact of their whole child approach while respecting concerns about measurement?

- + **Keep it conversational.** Teachers and families can talk about a child’s social and emotional growth on the phone or in person at parent teacher conferences or other events. Having an open dialogue about these skills helps to promote partnerships between families and teachers, rather than making judgments.
- + **Share progress in narrative form that include examples.** Many families want illustration of their child’s strengths and areas for growth in a non-grade format. Teachers can begin by discussing strengths before moving into areas for improvement. Sharing written anecdotes via email or in report cards can help families and teachers communicate effectively about the child’s holistic development.
- + **Use school climate surveys that include parent and student input.** A whole child approach to learning isn’t only about individual students, but the school culture as a whole. Schools and communities can collect useful data from school climate surveys. Visit the [National School Climate Center’s website](#) to learn more.

Conclusion

A whole child approach to education focuses on child development, not just to facilitate academic growth but also to build well-rounded individuals. When schools emphasize the importance of a student’s social, emotional, cognitive, physical, mental and identity development—as well as their academic development—children thrive in and out of school. Communities that take a whole child approach to education won’t all look the same, but they will all work to ensure students are safe, healthy, engaged, supported and challenged.

As children progress through school, parents play an important role to ensure their children are happy and academically prepared to make their dreams a reality. Check out National PTA’s resource, “Family Guide for Fostering Whole Child Development” for more information on what families can do to support this approach at home, in the classroom and in their school or district.

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¹ Olson, L. (2018). Developing Life Skills in Children: A Road Map for Communicating with Parents. *Developing Life Skills in Children: A Road Map for Communicating with Parents* (p. 1–33).

² Whole Child Approach to Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://chanzuckerberg.com/story/explore-the-whole-child-approach-to-education/>

³ Edutopia and Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, “Learning and the Social Brain,” featuring P. Kuhl(2018), retrieved from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/videos/learning-and-the-social-brain/>.

⁴ Bruce, M., & Bridgeland, J. (2014). *The Mentoring Effect: Young People’s Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring*. The Mentoring Effect: Young People’s Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring;

⁵ Durlak, R. Weissberg, A. Dymnicki, R. Taylor, and K. Schellinger, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405-432;

⁶ Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171

⁷ Grant, S., Hamilton, L. S., Wrabel, S. L., Gomez, C. J., Whitaker, A., et al. (2017). *Social and emotional learning interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence review*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

⁸ ASCD. (n.d.). *The Whole Child*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx>