

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and Emotional Learning in Religious and Spiritual Communities: Loving one's Neighbor

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April 2015

The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Religious and spiritual communities (RSCs) are a way that many youth make sense of life's experiences—the pain, hope, hurt, purpose, love, and loss. However, not all youth will identify with faith-based RSCs (Bussing, Föller-Mancini, Gidley & Heusser, 2010). RSCs are defined broadly and in a generic sense for this brief. Synagogue, masjid/mosque, temple, ward, gudwara, church, cathedral, spiritual community, and assembly are just a few examples of RSCs to which this brief refers. The activities and life of the particular community teach youth ways to live their life and how to understand and experience life. Others have noted the teaching and experience that occurs in RSCs contributes to positive outcomes through intergenerational role models, community life skills, and cultivating altruism (Ebstyn & Furrow, 2004; Smith, 2003). How does all this relate to social and emotional learning (SEL)?

SEL is a very broad area of research and practice. The [Ways of Being model](#), stresses three SEL dimensions: ways of feeling, relating, and doing (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2015). An important part of each of these areas is care and concern for self and others. A universal teaching across world religions is the golden rule of treating others as one wants to be treated by others ("love your neighbor as yourself"). This is highly connected to the ways of being model's focus on care and concern for oneself and others. Care and concern for oneself relates to introspection and self-awareness. Further, having empathy for others and proactively planning to taking action in service to or for the betterment of others relates to the care and concern of other.

RSCs already teach and practice neighbor love, but drawing on the insights from SEL can help those that work with youth in RSCs be more intentional about teaching and practicing this valuable part of their work. Neighbor love is an important part of how RSCs help youth make sense of life's experiences. In this brief I will explain how the insights from the ways of being model can help youth workers and religious community leaders be more intentional about teaching neighbor love with youth and provide coherence to the work they already do.

YOUTH PROGRAMES IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES

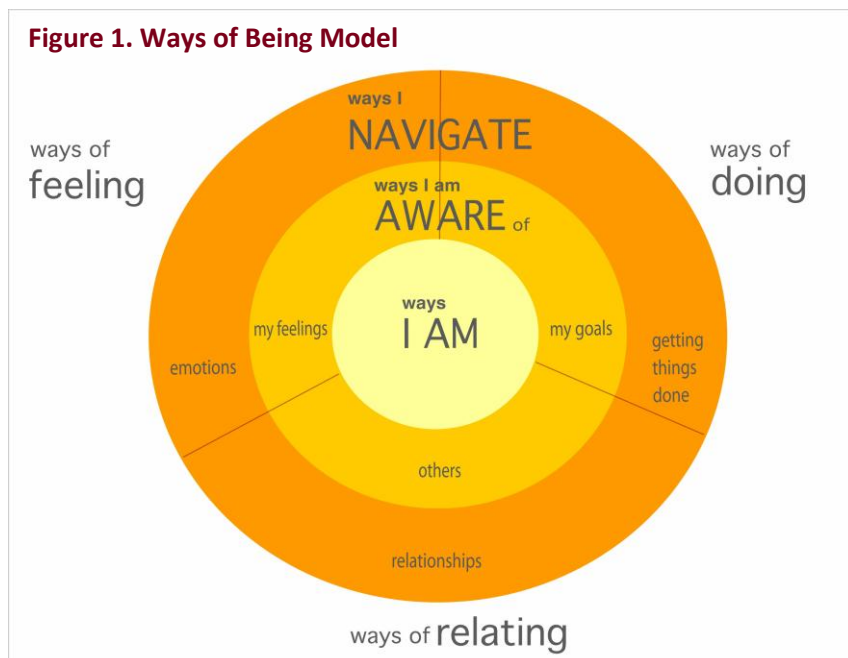
Youth programs in RSCs are one way that youth make sense of life's experiences. Meaning making can be thought of as developing a secure sense of identity rooted in past experiences that allows one to plan for the future. There are a wide variety of youth programs within RSCs that can promote SEL skill development. First, and not the focus of this brief, there are specific religious formation programs in most RSCs. For example, at [Plymouth Congregational Church](#), [Islamic Center of Minnesota](#), and [Hindu Temple of Minnesota](#) there are programs for youth ages three to eighteen (varies by community). They meet at different times during the week and have curricula focused on religious formation.

Second, and the focus of this brief, there are other youth programs that take place within RSCs and are not focused on faith formation. For example, Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis operates a non-profit center called [Redeemer Center for Life](#). Part of the mission statement of the center is as follows: "At Redeemer Center For Life, our business is the human spirit. Music, art, language, communal meals, healthy housing and the connectivity of the human spirit have been proven to encourage community life and empower those oppressed by poverty and social systems to self-advocate for better conditions." Within the Center for Life there is an after school program for twenty-five youth to learn "leadership and community skills so they can focus their energies on real world projects." One can see the ways of being model in the Center for Life's and afterschool program's mission: the youth focus on learning ways of relating (community) and ways of doing (real world projects). Though the church operates the afterschool program, there is no explicit teaching of religious beliefs. However, the program is teaching and cultivating neighbor love. If youth in similar programs are to learn neighbor love by learning to self-advocate, work towards building community, and focus their energy on real world projects, then the ways of being model can help to balance and align the work they are already doing so they can be more intentional in cultivating neighbor love.

WAYS OF BEING: A PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Teaching youth to self-advocate, work towards building community, and focus their energy on projects aimed at bettering the conditions of poverty all relate to ways of feeling, relating, and doing (Figure 1). The layers and sections of the model are not distinct in reality. For example, "ways I navigate" impacts the "ways I am" and vice versa; "ways of relating" influences "ways of feeling." Each of the sections and layers in the model are connected and influence each other.

The "ways of feeling" section includes how emotions relate to one's identity, how one is aware of his or her feelings, and how one navigates the emotions of complex interpersonal relationships. Youth with strengths in this area are good at identifying and talking about, and managing how they feel. The second section, "ways of



relating,” focuses more on the ability to develop relationships and for youth to negotiate and comprehend their interactions with others. Cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, caring, and intuition about social settings are examples of skills in this area. Such skills represent how one is self-aware, how one is aware of others, and how one is able to cultivate stable relationships. Lastly, “ways of doing” is the most task-focused of the three sections. Resilience, grit, goal setting, growth mindset, and critical thinking are all words used to describe competency in this area. Ways of doing includes acts of care and concern as well as the larger projects and goals that can shape the life of a community.

NEIGHBOR LOVE AS A WAY OF BEING

The ways of being model is a helpful way to think about the various elements of SEL. Each relates to the practice and teaching of neighbor love in RSCs. Neighbor love here will be defined as demonstrating care and concern for others and oneself. The ways of feeling, relating, and doing contain elements of care, altruism, and concern for others. RSCs can use the model as a resource to be more intentional and provide more coherence as they live out the value of neighbor love. Literally, neighbor love is a way of being for RSCs.

For those youth programs that take place within RSCs but are not focused on religious formation, the ways of being model can be a helpful way to balance and align the work they are already doing so they can be more intentional in cultivating neighbor love. In terms of balance, the ways of feeling, relating, and doing can balance both elements of neighbor love: caring for oneself and caring for others. Youth need to be aware of and care for their own emotions and needs, but also empathize with others and work toward building community. Western philosophy, theology, and more recently psychology, has referred to this as balancing love of others and love of the self (Browning, 2006). If RSCs focus only on one of these extremes their work is incomplete. Youth workers within RSCs can examine their program and ask themselves if one or more of the sections of the model is not getting attention in their program. Do the programs help youth reflect on their own needs and feelings, interpersonal relationships, and projects and tasks that care for the neighbor?

The ways of being model also helps RSCs align and organize the tools and elements they are already using in their youth programs to help the program be more intentional about cultivating neighbor love. The model can provide categories for RSCs to place the elements of their program. Placing the elements of the program will help a RSC look at and dissect each element so that they can make it align with their goals. This is also part of the balance mentioned above. What is going on in our program and what should we be doing? Youth programs in RSCs have a variety of elements, and organizing these elements with the ways of feeling, relating, and doing can help sharpen the goals of the program.

For example, let’s say an RSC has a program for youth that focuses on painting, and in this program youth are encouraged to paint their experience of community. Mapping this activity on the ways of being model can help an RSC understand the various layers of this specific activity: how it does or does not align with all three sections of the model, and what should be changed and stay the same about this activity if it is to cultivate neighbor love? Do painting experiences of community make the youth more aware of their own emotions and the emotions of others? The youth might be able to use painting as a way to reflect on how they feel about their community and how others in the community might feel. How does this practice help youth develop caring relationships with others? In imagining how they and others feel, the youth might be able to start to name what they need in order to feel part of a community as well as what others need. How does this practice help the youth work toward transforming their community into a place where all feel cared for and loved? Youth might be able to come up with a small project or goal for the next year to work on as a result.

IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR NEIGHBOR LOVE CULTIVATION

Social and emotional learning can be intentionally promoted in both secular and faith-based settings. The painting activity is just one example of how the ways of being model can help a youth program in an RSC be more intentional about cultivating neighbor love. There are many other types of practices that can help teach this value, and each of these can be put in conversation with the ways of being model so it can be more effective. The list below contains a few overall strategies:

1. Create space for communal story-telling and sharing. Youth can share their experiences of helping others and being cared for themselves.
2. Deep listening and reflection in one to one conversations between youth program leaders and youth.
3. Visit another RSC youth program in the area as a community to hear the story of that program so that both communities learn about each other.
4. Participate in a volunteer public service as a group with intentional reflection time before and after the volunteering.

The implications of focusing the ways of being model on neighbor love go beyond non-religious formation programs in RSCs. Programs focused on religious formation can also use the insights from the model. Students in faith-based youth groups reported higher rates of self-awareness and ability to navigate relationships (Larson, Hansen & Moneta, 2006). The beauty of the ways of being model is that it helps a youth program look at its overall mission and specific practices within the program through the three sections. By using these three sections and levels, a program can balance and align the way in which it is teaching the youth to live out the value of neighbor love. Is the RSC using its education time to teach values such as the golden rule, and if so, how is it being taught? Are nurturing intergenerational relationships present in the community? What are the rituals in the community that demonstrate neighbor love? RSCs should be teaching the value of neighbor love, and the ways of being model can aid them in this important work.

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