

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

“In a world that often feels disconnected, developing SEL Muscles is more essential than ever for fostering meaningful connections and promoting healthy relationships—with both others and ourselves. This book masterfully combines evidence-based practices and research to present six critical tools for personal growth. Lori Woodley-Langendorff draws on the expertise of specialists, seamlessly blending neuroscience with practical, actionable steps to help readers enhance their lives.”

—Raghu Appasani, MD

Integrative and Addiction Psychiatrist and Entrepreneur

“In SEL Muscle Mastery, Lori offers a revolutionary approach to building emotional strength and fostering connection. Her six tools are not just strategies—they are life-changing practices that align perfectly with living your passions and creating meaningful relationships. This book is an essential guide for anyone ready to make a difference in their own life and the lives of others.”

—Janet Bray Attwood

New York Times Bestselling Author, Trainer, Humanitarian

“With over thirty years of experience in education, I’ve never seen a greater need for schools to be equipped with tools that address social-emotional learning. I believe we have yet to fully recognize the long-term impact COVID has had on children, and how these effects continue to manifest even five years later. This book is rooted in solid research, with tools that Lori’s team has successfully used to demonstrate effective strategies and practices that can be easily applied in classrooms. I am grateful for Lori’s expertise and collaboration with our school, and I am thrilled that others will now benefit from her valuable insights.”

—Dr. Marlene Batista

Superintendent, Los Angeles, CA

“As a child and family therapist, I’m often asked for quick, effective solutions that deliver immediate results. This book provides exactly that—a practical, accessible guide to better understanding yourself through six core SEL Muscles. The book includes relatable examples from both classroom and home settings, and it breaks down each concept into actionable steps, empowering readers to become stronger leaders, clearer communicators, and more thoughtful problem-solvers in their families, classrooms, and communities. Each SEL Muscle builds on essential skills like empathy, accountability, and curiosity, offering tools that are not only easy to apply but also profoundly effective. By consistently flexing these muscles, readers can create lasting, meaningful change in their relationships and inspire those around them to grow as well.”

—Sarah Bernson, LMFT

Child and Family Therapist, Trauma Therapist,
and SEL Trainer and Facilitator

“SEL Muscle Mastery is a game-changer for educators and parents seeking practical strategies to strengthen emotional resilience and create a more balanced life. With relatable insights and actionable techniques, this book equips readers with six essential mental muscles to navigate challenges with confidence and ease. It’s a must-read for anyone committed to fostering emotional intelligence and well-being in themselves and the children they support!”

—LaDonna Braswell, EdS

High School Principal, Jackson, Tennessee

“The topic in SEL Muscle Mastery is timely, and I appreciate the manner in which Lori Woodley-Langendorff looks at the whole person AND the whole community. The author’s passion and personal stake are evident. They are honest that there can be pitfalls and difficulties, but that the benefits make up for the struggle.

Woodley-Langendorff shows the reader that flexing your muscles doesn’t just happen in the gym: in fact, we exercise our brains and bodies almost daily, yet we often fail to recognize the necessity in stretching our social and emotional skills. SEL Muscle Mastery makes the case for not only the existence of SEL muscles, but the importance of growing them with intentionality.”

—Melissa A. Campbell

K-5 Mathematics Specialist,
Alabama Math, Science, and Technology (AMSTI):
University of Alabama at Huntsville, AL

"Most of us accept the gloom and doom about our school systems: disengaged staff, outdated methods, and the countless safety concerns of students—and not just physical safety, but emotional and psychological safety as well. Instead of accepting the status quo, Lori Woodley-Langendorff has written a manifesto. These are the six mental muscles educators must build not only to teach our next generation, but also to have more fun doing it. Her ideas are battle-tested daily, in her living laboratory of storytelling, filmmaking, and creating movements with educators across the globe. If you got in the game to create safe spaces for your students to thrive, this is your book."

—Kristoffer Carter

Best-Selling Author of *Permission to Glow:
A Spiritual Guide to Epic Leadership*

"SEL Muscle Mastery is an essential tool kit for anyone committed to nurturing resilience and connection for young people. This book expertly blends relatable stories and practical insights with transformative approaches, making it a must-read for educators and caregivers alike who are on the front lines of raising youth."

—Alex Craighead, MAT

Educator, Speaker, and Co-founder of Journeymen Institute

"SEL Muscle Mastery is for anyone wishing to broaden relationship skills with young people, family, colleagues, and the larger community. Lori Woodley-Langendorff has effectively outlined what and how to strengthen our core communications and trust-building muscles. Every incoming teacher and expectant family/carer should be given a copy of this book!"

—Justine Fischer

Family and Youth Engagement Advocate

"These all-too-familiar stories encourage educators, parents, and carers to notice the emotional tyranny we unnecessarily subject ourselves to. Lori Woodley-Langendorff's SEL Muscles empower readers with simple skills to choose and strategies to act, thus promoting harmony in our homes and classrooms. The author reassures us that although these muscles may not be easy to flex, it gets easier with time."

—Christina Fitzgerald

Director of Curriculum and Instruction,
Westside Union School District, California

“Lori Woodley-Langendorff’s SEL Muscle Mastery is an inspiring and actionable guide for educators and carers navigating the complexities of social-emotional learning. With relatable anecdotes, practical tools, and a focus on empowering both adults and young people, this book delivers on its promise to foster resilience, connection, and growth. Its emphasis on self-awareness and modeling positive behaviors makes it a transformative resource for anyone committed to creating trusted spaces where communities thrive. This is a must-read for those passionate about impactful education and personal growth.”

—Ronald Holt, DO, MA

University Psychiatrist, California

“This book provides a resource for adults to learn more about SEL and how this can impact how they approach a task or problem with their students. This is a much needed resource for any adult that is working with students. Modeling, teaching, and learning how to listen and respond is crucial as mental health concerns continue to rise in our young people. This resource would be a great addition to the work of our mental health wellness team. Equipping the adults with a clear understanding of their mental health and recognizing how we respond to student needs.”

—Katina Keener

Associate Director of Student Services,
Gloucester County Public Schools, VA

“As a school counselor, I am profoundly inspired by Lori Woodley-Langendorff’s unwavering dedication to empowering others through social-emotional learning. Her book, SEL Muscle Mastery, introduces the transformative Notice Choose Act framework, which has significantly enhanced my ability to support students’ emotional and social development. By treating SEL as a muscle to be strengthened, this guide provides practical strategies that have elevated my practice and deepened my connection with students. Lori’s commitment to cultivating atmospheres where individuals recognize their inherent greatness and the interconnectedness of our life journeys makes this an invaluable resource for educators devoted to nurturing well-rounded individuals.”

—Cher Kretz, MS, PPS

School Counselor, TEDx Speaker,
Podcast Host of *The Focused Mindset*

“SEL Muscle Mastery serves as a blueprint for developing and strengthening essential life skills—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and decision-making. The powerful concept of Notice Choose Act transforms us from passive bystanders into active difference-makers. Written in a user-friendly style, this book empowers educators and carers alike to foster meaningful relationships, personal growth, and lasting change. While SEL Muscles are not a new concept, Lori Woodley-Langendorff inspires readers to actively engage in strengthening what matters most: relationships.”

—Alma Lopez, MS, PPS

District School Counseling Coordinator
2021 California School Counselor of the Year
2022 National School Counselor of the Year

“SEL Muscle Mastery is a transformative and essential guide for educators and carers seeking to build resilience and foster deep connections with students. Lori Woodley-Langendorff masterfully blends research-backed strategies with relatable storytelling, equipping readers with practical SEL tools that create trusted spaces for growth. This book is a must-read for anyone dedicated to supporting the well-being of young people while strengthening their emotional intelligence and leadership.”

—Homero M. Magaña, EdD

Tenure-Track Instructor and Fieldwork Coordinator,
Graduate Counselor Education Program,
California Lutheran University

“With over 20 years of experience teaching Grades 6–12, my success has been rooted in building positive relationships in a student-centered classroom. The ideas Lori Woodley-Langendorff shares in this book reinforce the work I was lucky enough to witness and learn from her as a colleague, and I found myself once again being reminded and reenergized by what I read. Veteran teachers and new teachers alike, along with other VIPs in students’ lives, will find encouragement that well-being matters and can make all the difference in the way we are equipped to better our students’ lives and educational experiences.”

—Jill Magnante, MEd

High School English Teacher, California

"This book is a must-have for educators seeking to foster students' social-emotional growth while also nurturing their own well-being. Packed with practical strategies, it equips teachers to create supportive, empathetic learning environments without sacrificing self-care. SEL Muscle Mastery is a powerful guide for balanced and sustainable SEL practice."

—Marcy Melvin, MA

Behavioral Health Executive, Texas

"The author of SEL Muscle Mastery feels like a trusted friend sitting down to share practical, powerful tools for communicating with heart and clarity. Through simple, relatable advice like using "I-statements," not taking things personally, and getting clear on what you need, it offers strategies anyone can apply in everyday life. Whether in a classroom, at home, or in any relationship, these tools—perfectly described as muscles to practice and strengthen—are thoughtfully presented in a way that's both easy to read and genuinely empowering."

—Renee Nealon

Fourth/Fifth Grade Teacher,
Petaluma City Schools, CA

"This is a powerful and practical guide that helps you cultivate emotional intelligence through a blend of personal reflection and actionable strategies. Designed for both educators and parents, each chapter offers insightful exercises and creative prompts that allow you to make the content your own, fostering deeper connections and personal growth. Whether journaling, reflecting, or engaging with the material in another way, this book provides valuable tools to navigate everyday life with awareness and intention."

—Stephen Pietrolungo, EdD

Middle and High School Principal, Simi Valley, California

"Lori Woodley-Langendorff's SEL Muscle Mastery offers a groundbreaking approach to building emotional intelligence and resilience. Through practical exercises and insightful strategies, it empowers readers to strengthen key social and emotional skills that are vital for success in both personal and professional settings. It's a must-read for anyone looking to enhance their emotional well-being and navigate life's challenges with confidence and empathy. This book is an invaluable resource for educators, parents, and individuals alike!"

—Daniel Pratt

Teacher/Coach

"If you are looking for practical ways to create emotional resilience, look no further than SEL Muscle Mastery. This is a masterful work with practical applications for anyone looking to help either themselves or others grow their emotional intelligence. Lori Woodley-Langendorff's work is based on practical experience as well as research and is easy to read and apply. Having personally observed her work with children over a long period of time, this book summarizes all that Lori has gleaned in those experiences as well as the work she has done with notable experts in this space. Reading it will give you a new perspective or will reinforce and extend what you are already thinking!"

—Regina L. Rossall
Superintendent, CA

"SEL Muscle Mastery is a book for anyone who works with children. Helping students develop SEL skills ensures our children flourish not only in the school setting, but also in life! Teaching children to notice, choose, and act at an early age helps them to be empathetic to those around them as well as reflective of their own impact."

—Shannon Rossall-Bennett, EdD
Educator and Parent, California

"SEL Muscle Mastery is a game-changer for educators, providing six powerful tools to build resilience, emotional intelligence, and authentic connection in schools and communities. This book goes beyond theory, offering practical strategies that transform classroom culture, deepen student engagement, and create lasting impact. By strengthening SEL educators, Lori empowers students with the confidence and skills they need to navigate life's challenges with resilience and purpose. This is a must-read for anyone committed to shaping the future of education."

—Christopher Salem
Award Winning Author and Executive Coach

"The timing of SEL Muscle Mastery is perfect: this book highlights the critical need for developing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, especially for educators and caregivers working with young people. In today's complex, fast-paced world, these "SEL muscles" seem increasingly important for building strong relationships and supporting healthy development. The framework is grounded in research and best practices, making it a credible approach. Additionally, the author's tone is warm, understanding, and invites the reader to be a partner in the process. This helps establish trust and credibility, making the guidance throughout the book feel more accessible and supportive."

—Terri Serey
Assistant Principal,
Hacienda La Puente Unified, CA

“SEL Muscle Mastery is an extraordinary resource for educators, parents, and caregivers who want to nurture resilience and empathy in young people. Lori’s innovative strategies bridge the gap between emotional intelligence and happiness, offering practical tools that inspire lasting change. Her work is a beacon of hope for creating more compassionate schools and communities.”

—Marci Shimoff

#1 NY Times Bestselling
Author of Happy for No Reason and
Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul

“SEL Muscle Mastery offers a revolutionary and thought-provoking way to teach and learn, especially with the advancement of AI, the fastest-growing technology in human history. Lori Woodley-Langendorff’s insights and practices are needed for human beings to live, think, and love.”

—Bettie Spruill

CEO, Ideal Coaching Global,
Transformational Leader and Writer

“SEL Muscle Mastery is an essential tool kit for educators and caregivers alike. Through powerful messaging and relatable anecdotes, Lori Woodley-Langendorff equips readers with feasible ways to foster healthy relationships with children and adolescents. As an education researcher and a former special education teacher, I find this book particularly powerful because it encourages sustainable practices that may mitigate educator burnout and caregiver fatigue. Readers are guided with actionable steps to help them grow as individuals so they can better support others with various needs.”

—Alicia A. Stewart-Kitten, PhD

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

“With this book, Lori completely took me out of my comfort zone. She took me outside of the books with which I had been taught, the mentoring I had, and the lessons I learned while attending school. She made me grow in ways that have made me a force to be reckoned with as a school counselor.”

—Nicole Vitto

School Counselor,
Conejo Valley Unified School District, CA

“Lori Woodley-Langendorff’s SEL Muscle Mastery is an essential guide for educators, parents, and carers committed to shaping resilient, empathetic, and self-aware young people. Lori introduces the SEL Muscles—transformative tools like Quit Taking It Personally (QTIP) and Walk the Talk—offering a practical framework for navigating emotional challenges with clarity and compassion. Her engaging approach invites readers to rethink how they engage with young people, emphasizing connection, trust, and mutual growth. By integrating personal stories, actionable strategies, and the innovative Notice Choose Act framework, Lori equips readers to meet challenges with purpose and optimism. This book not only uplifts young lives but also rejuvenates the adults guiding them. It is a must-read for anyone striving to foster meaningful relationships and resiliency in our children and youth.”

—Loretta Whitson, EdD

Executive Director, California
Association of School Counselors

SEL Muscle Mastery

Six Tools for Building Resilience
and Connection in Schools
and Communities

Lori Woodley-Langendorff

Foreword by Pedro A. Noguera

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Contents

Foreword by Pedro A. Noguera	xvii
Preface	xxi
Key Words, Phrases, and Ideas	xxv
Purpose and Research	xxvii
How to Use This Book	xxix
Acknowledgments	xxx
About the Author	xxxv

Introduction	1
The Power of SEL Muscles in Our Lives	1
Why SEL Muscles?	2
The SEL Muscles	4
Educators: How SEL Muscles Transform the Classroom	5
Parents and Carers: How SEL Muscles Strengthen	
Family Relationships	6
Notice Choose Act: The Framework to Achieve	
SEL Muscle Mastery	9
Notice	11
Choose	12
Act	14

MUSCLE #1: QUIT TAKING IT PERSONALLY (QTIP)

Introduction to QTIP	17
QTIP for Educators	18
How Often Does the Need to QTIP Show Up in Our Lives?	23
QTIP for Families and Carers	29
QTIP Cautious Considerations	36
Caution #1: Actually Doing It	36
Caution #2: What We Need to Hear	39
QTIP Review	41
QTIP Pause and Reflect	43

MUSCLE #2: THE POWER OF "I"

Introduction to the Power of "I"	45
The Power of "I" for Educators	46
The Power of "I" for Families and Carers	57
What Is a "You" Statement?	62
What Is an "I" Statement?	62

The Psychology Behind “You” Statements and “I” Statements	63
The Power of “I” Cautious Considerations	65
Caution #1: Blame and Guilt	66
Caution #2: You Owe Me	67
The Power of “I” Review	70
The Power of “I” Pause and Reflect	72

MUSCLE #3: ASK VS. TELL

Introduction to Ask vs. Tell	73
Ask vs. Tell for Educators	74
Using Muscles #1, #2, and #3 Together	81
Ask vs. Tell for Families and Carers	83
A Few Examples	86
Ask vs. Tell as a Powerful Game-Changer	89
Cautious Considerations	90
Caution #1: Are We Really Asking?	90
Caution #2: Guilt and Shame	92
Ask vs. Tell Review	95
Ask vs. Tell Pause and Reflect	97

MUSCLE #4: STORYTELLING

Introduction to Storytelling	99
Storytelling for Educators	100
Why Do We Tell Stories?	100
What to Keep in Mind	102
What Is the Main Objective of Any Storytelling?	103
How Do We Know What Stories to Tell?	104
How to Be Best Prepared	104
Flex for Success	106
What If Storytelling Is Not Your Thing?	106
Storytelling for Families and Carers	110
Storytelling Cautious Considerations	113
Caution #1: Comparisons	113
Caution #2: Remember Your Audience	114
Storytelling Review	116
Storytelling Pause and Reflect	118

MUSCLE #5: CURIOSITY

Introduction to Curiosity	119
Curiosity for Educators	120
How Can You Truly See Your Students?	127
Curiosity for Families and Carers	129
Curiosity Cautious Considerations	134
Caution #1: Discernment	135
Caution #2: Allow for Autonomy	136
Caution #3: Devices and Distractions	136

Curiosity Review	138
Curiosity Pause and Reflect	140

MUSCLE #6: WALK THE TALK

Introduction to Walk the Talk	141
Walk the Talk for Educators	142
Walk the Talk for Families and Carers	143
Walk the Talk Cautious Considerations	145
Caution #1: Realistic and Credible	146
Caution #2: Role Clarity	146
Walk the Talk Review	149
Walk the Talk Pause and Reflect	151
 Conclusion: SEL Muscle Summary	 153
Finding Success	154
Invite Others In!	155
Notice Choose Act Your Way	155
Build Strong School–Home Relationships	156
Stay the Course	156
 References	 157
Index	159

Foreword

It's taken a while, but policymakers finally seem to realize that hungry, sick, and mentally distressed children often do not do well in school. Most parents have known this for much longer, but unfortunately, the concerns of parents tend not to matter much in setting education policy in the United States. For too long, the social and emotional needs of children have been largely ignored as policymakers have pressured schools to generate higher levels of achievement. As policymakers have decried persistent disparities in achievement (the so-called achievement gap) and mediocre results when the United States is compared to other nations, too often they have failed to address the obvious fact that the kids with the greatest needs generally do the least well academically.

For a variety of reasons, it appears we are now ready for a new approach. In this book, Lori Woodley-Langendorff offers a practical guide to a new approach. In plain language she explains why helping adults to develop what she calls their social and emotional literacy—or “SEL Muscles”—is so important. Though their primary role is to address the educational needs of students, many educators now understand that they must also develop their capacity to respond to the social and emotional needs of students. Such skills create a classroom environment that is conducive to good teaching and learning. Students learn through relationships, and when relationships are strained or dysfunctional, it is often extremely difficult for teachers or school counselors to carry out their responsibilities.

The question is this: How should educators acquire and cultivate these essential skills? Though parents often know more about their children, they will benefit from the development of these skills, or “muscles” as the author describes them, that are essential for helping children develop into healthy, balanced adults.

Woodley-Langendorff reminds us that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, such skills became as important as knowing how to master the technology required to teach virtually. We knew that large numbers of students were struggling with stress and fear caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic and with depression often related to prolonged isolation. The author and her colleagues created a groundbreaking film, *A Trusted Space: Redirecting Grief to Growth*, to draw attention to these issues. The film had a virtual reach across all 50 states and 27 countries, reaching tens of thousands

of educators who were desperately trying to navigate the effects of quarantine and the pandemic. The documentary proved to be a critical affirmation of the work many educators were doing—providing comfort to students in need even though many had no formal training as counselors.

Recognizing the need to broaden the public's understanding of the widespread mental health challenges facing many children, and in some cases educators, Woodley-Langendorff designed the *Building Trusted Spaces in Five Days* curriculum so that educators had access to the skills and strategies needed to provide their students with support in social, emotional, and mental health.

Woodley-Langendorff has now written this book to serve as another resource for educators. Again, it comes at a critical time. Though schools have been back open for over three years, many continue to face alarming challenges related to problematic behavior (including fights and drug use), a variety of persistent mental health issues, and a noted increase in chronic absenteeism. The prevalence of these issues has made it difficult for schools to focus exclusively on teaching and learning, and many are now more open to developing their SEL Muscles.

Throughout the United States, there is growing interest in the concept and practice of wellness. Wellness is now being embraced by a number of schools to respond holistically to the needs of students. Instead of reacting after an incident or crisis, the wellness approach calls for a preventive strategy to promote wellness and health outcomes. For example, wellness advocates encourage us to treat food as a form of medicine because good nutrition is essential for health and well-being. Similarly, wellness advocates encourage us to treat exercise as a means of preventing illness, to get enough sleep and rest to prevent fatigue and burnout, and to have regular access to play and recreation to promote joy and healthy relationships.

In a similar vein, Woodley-Langendorff's new book encourages readers to develop their SEL Muscles because such capacities and skills are critical to the wellness and well-being of students. Such skills are also vital for educators, parents, and carers. She reminds us that healthy relationships can't be taken for granted; they don't typically emerge on their own. Rather, the development of healthy relationships and social skills in kids requires

intentional development, attention, and participation if we are to create nurturing and supportive communities. By developing our SEL Muscles, we can create school communities where every member—students, families, and staff—experiences a sense of belonging, care, and trust.

SEL Muscles are needed because we are in the midst of a “crisis of connection” (NYU Press, 2014). In 2014, I coauthored a book on this topic with my colleagues Niobe Way, Alisha Ali, and Carol Gilligan, documenting how loneliness and social isolation were growing, reinforced by the myth of “rugged individualism.” Together, these trends have produced an empathy gap and reinforced the social fragmentation that makes it increasingly difficult for our society to tackle a variety of social ills including a dramatic rise in what sociologists refer to as “deaths of despair”—rising suicide rates, overdose deaths caused by substance abuse, and so on.

In the pages ahead, Lori Woodley-Langendorff shows us how to build our SEL Muscles to counter the crisis of connection by constructing strong, nurturing communities in our schools. This book is timely, the strategies the author provides are practical, and the skills she encourages us to develop will make our schools better places for all.

Pedro A. Noguera, PhD
Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean
Rossier School of Education
University of Southern California

Preface

For decades I have been a school counselor, a mom, a partner, and a hard-working, deeply empathic woman who has pressed her introverted nature to the very edges of comfort. I have learned most of my important life lessons from those I care most about, starting with my children and extended family, and through service-oriented work starting at age 18 in a domestic violence shelter.

I thought I had most of it figured out and under control when I became a school counselor, a wife, and a mom in my mid-20s.

LITTLE DID I KNOW HOW MUCH I HAD YET TO LEARN!

The biggest lesson I recognized and am reminded of still today is that I am a work in progress, an ever-evolving, perfectly imperfect, and uniquely individual human. I seek to understand and grow even when I seem to be slipping backwards. I see myself in every other human's eye, and I realize that we are more alike than different and that we are all doing the best we can with what we know in any given moment. I learned compassion for myself in my service to others. I learned that what I could see in others I deserved to see in myself.

For years I was relentless on myself, a champion of others while not seeing or celebrating *me*. I could not see the impact of this, on myself or on others who cared deeply for me. The need to constantly improve bled out into my actions, my words, and my requirements for perfection, which inherently is an impossible task and untenable responsibility. I lived to prove rather than demonstrate my value. Learning to be self-accepting and vulnerable were skills that changed my life, and over time I began to repair compromised relationships.

What I recognized over years in education is that educators and parents or carers often are in a similar situation, where they are so focused outward that the person in the mirror is blurry and unrecognizable. In my work, I cultivate atmospheres where audiences feel the power of their greatness, a blend of outward and inward focus, developing traits that can up-level

lives without dictating the path. As I evolved my own desired outcomes and recognized the positive impact I have on others, I realized that one cannot exist without the other: My life journey influences yours, and your life journey influences mine. It is the way in which we choose to influence and receive or repel influence, both within and outside of ourselves, that creates our personal joy and well-being. Identifying how to do this with wisdom and purpose is the work.

The SEL Muscles™ were not always called such. I wrote and facilitated trainings that focused on similar skills, and I worked hard to live what I taught. It was bumpy for sure, but even small steps forward count as forward progress! Then, on June 3, 2020, in the middle of a global pandemic, I received a text that added new direction to my life's work.

“Please, get that new producer friend of yours, and let’s make a film on trauma.

Our teachers are going to need to understand it more than ever, and if they have to pay to attend a workshop, they will not be able to afford it.”

—Christina Fitzgerald

**Director of Curriculum and Instruction,
Westside Union School District, California**

Everyone was pivoting that summer—families and education ecosystems—and my organization was no different. My nervous system was in a daily battle of fight, flight, or freeze, and suddenly there was a direction. Without any qualms I sent out the call, and within two days we had a commitment from Emmy Award-winning documentary film producer Karin Gornick and a small but mighty film crew, Skerritt Creative, to create what would, two and a half months later, become an expert-driven and award-winning film, *A Trusted Space: Redirecting Grief to Growth*, accompanied with a research-based curriculum, *Building Trusted Spaces in Five Days*.

It was a whirlwind summer, doing two huge projects during the pandemic, each of which would typically take about nine months. Bringing together decades of personal and professional work and learning and the urgency of the moment, the SEL Muscles came to life.

Everyone was talking about how we were going to need more from our educators to support our young people, but what about the educators and parents themselves—what would they need to reach a place where they could meet the needs of their young people? This question was a catalyst for the SEL Muscles.

By the time the film and curriculum were released in September 2020, the project was embraced by neuroscientists at the University of Southern California and researchers at the Hackett Center for Mental Health in Texas, to name just a couple. Viewers accessed the film from all 50 states, 27 countries, and networks such as PBS, and education organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers put it on their educator resource platforms. Our little nonprofit simply wanted to support the education system and never could have guessed the impact we would have.

Jump forward four years, and the five SEL Muscles became six SEL Muscles, while *A Trusted Space*, born as one film, became more than 40. As films dropped, curriculum expanded, and need continued to grow, SEL Muscles and Building Trusted Spaces trainings took off across the country.

Finally, it was time for the book.

Welcome!

Key Words, Phrases, and Ideas

Each of us responds differently to various words and approaches, and my hope is to offer you meaningful content that meets you right where you are. I invite you to consider the content in this book and, if the words, phrases, and approaches are not a fit but the content is, change them to something that resonates with you.

Acknowledgment: There are as many different ideas, beliefs, mindsets, cultural identifications, and lived experiences as there are humans on the planet. There is incredible alchemy in the way each person's independent worldview feeds into the collective. While I make every effort to find examples and approaches that will reach a wide range of people, I know I will miss addressing the experience of every person. If you do not see your specific circumstances reflected, it is my hope that you can find relatability and insights through the situations of others.

Educators: If you serve students in the education ecosystem, regardless of role, I consider you an educator. Whether you are in the classroom, supervising the playground, driving a bus, running a wellness center, or greeting students and parents in the front office, you are influencing our young people and their families, and hence you are an educator. The SEL Muscles are for all of you, and they will serve you well.

Parents, Carers, and Families: Throughout the book I refer to adults at home as parents and carers. This group of people includes moms, dads, aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster parents, friends, and all other titles not listed who are raising our young people. There is no "one look" or "one title" for families, and all who are raising children fall into the title of parent or carer for this book.

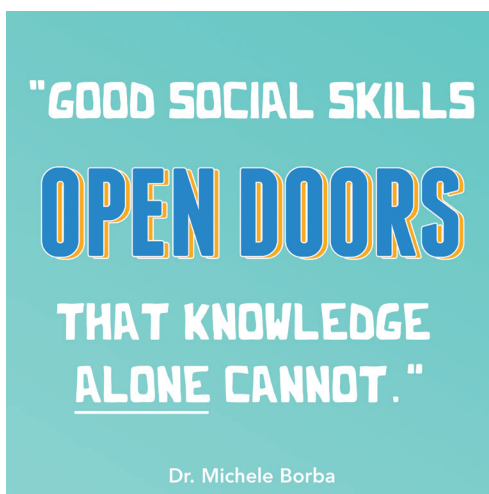
Community: If you are not a parent/carer or an educator, you are likely still part of a community that cares about the future of our young people while also trying to balance personal wellness with the overwhelm and worry that life can create. If you are looking to experience more ease, peace of mind, and happiness, this book is a resource for you too.

Serve vs. Save: It is my belief that our role is to serve our young people in ways that help them develop skills to take on their social, emotional, mental, and academic well-being. We need to be modeling this for them

while believing in their ability to learn and apply the skills themselves. If we save them from paving their way through all the terrains—easy, fun, hard, sad—we are not preparing them for a future they can manage and thrive in regardless of circumstance. You will recognize that the SEL Muscles are intended to serve, not save, starting with ourselves.

Social-Emotional Literacy (SEL), often known as social-emotional learning and emotional intelligence, includes skills such as teamwork, communication, decision-making, independent thinking, and leadership. Throughout this book I will be using the acronym SEL. I prefer to think of it as skills to become *literate* in, like reading or mathematics. They are skills that elevate one's ability to effectively navigate productive lives, with resilience and care, regardless of present and past circumstances. These skills support us through painful times and allow us to enjoy times of ease and success. It is my ultimate hope that one day SEL will become as important to develop and measure as all the other “academic” focuses our current education model prioritizes.

Triggered vs. Upset: At this point the word *triggered* is becoming part of mainstream vernacular and consciousness. We can all see people, places, memories, associations, and things that trigger us. In some cases they are minor, while in other cases they can feel almost impossible to not react to, at times evoking an actual trauma response. You will notice that I use terms such as *upset* interchangeably with *trigger* and their meaning is the same.



Purpose and Research

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

As mentioned in the preface, the original five SEL Muscles were developed over the summer of 2020 as a component of the *Building Trusted Spaces in Five Days* curriculum and in tandem with the production of the film *A Trusted Space: Redirecting Grief to Growth*. Both the curriculum, including the SEL Muscles, and the film, along with subsequent films in the series, were developed using evidence-informed and research-based practices and concepts. Additionally, in our commitment to provide meaningful and freely accessible resources to educators, we had the good fortune to partner with three nationally recognized clinical teams. These partners were Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), the Hackett Center for Mental Health (HCMH), both based in Texas, and the University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education.

Overseeing the clinical endorsement from MMHPI and the HCMH were the following professionals:

- Gary Blau, PhD, Executive Director
- Gwenn Blau, MA, Chief of Staff
- Jennifer Gonzalez, PhD, Senior Director of Population Health
- Marcy Melvin, MA, LPC, Senior Director of Health Equity Strategy
- Linda Rodriguez, EdD, Senior Director for School Behavioral Health
- Patrick Tennant, PhD, Project Manager

Clinical partners at USC Rossier included the following:

- Alan Arkatov, Katzman/Ernst Chair in Educational Entrepreneurship, Technology, and Innovation
- Rebecca Gotlieb, PhD, USC Provost's Research and Teaching Fellow
- Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, EdD, Neuroscientist, Human Development Psychologist

The clinical partners were responsible for reviewing and assessing the curriculum in its entirety. The SEL Muscles became highlighted as a critical element contributing to the program's qualitative and quantitative success. Recognized by both teams for their emphasis on enhancing educators' social-emotional literacy skills, the SEL Muscles play a pivotal role in fostering healthy relationships. These connections are vital for supporting students' emotional health and academic achievement while simultaneously promoting the well-being of educators and carers.

The six SEL Muscles are high-level communication skills that are as much about our impact on ourselves as they are about our impact on others. Independently, some of the SEL Muscles are skills often identified as key to having healthy relationships, engaging in positive and courageous leadership, and developing resilience while balancing personal and professional desires and needs. Authors and researchers who speak to these skills each come from their own worldview and present to the audience they serve.

My passion is for educators and the young scholars and families they serve, and in defining the SEL Muscles it was clear that developed, strengthened, and flexed together these skills could be game-changing both personally and across educational settings (a top priority). I have sought out and received anonymous observations from SEL Muscle users and received several streams of feedback that point to evidence of the skills' efficacy. These include the clinical endorsement of the aforementioned esteemed partners, the body of research pointing to the urgent need to elevate teacher wellness, and the unbiased feedback we've received from early SEL Muscle trainings and pre-published reviews of the book. Through this feedback, I received overwhelming commentary that the SEL Muscles, whether standing alone or as a part of our Building Trusted Spaces or other trainings, serve as powerful tools to support educators and carers facing unprecedented times.

Whether trying to get our kids off their devices and ready for a good night's sleep or trying to engage them in caring about their own educational development, navigating growing emotional turmoil is often beyond our reliable skill set. The SEL Muscles are a positive place to start.

How to Use This Book

This book is intended to be your working guide—A Trusted Space® in a book, a place where you not only feel seen and heard but experience understanding and value while simultaneously equipping yourself with tools that are tangible and practical to your everyday life. Within each chapter you will find an introduction to one of the SEL Muscles as well as a section dedicated to educators and a section for parents and carers.

Each chapter ends with summary of chapter highlights and a reflection opportunity that I invite you to engage with in whatever way feels right to you. Journal, wonder and ponder, talk to a friend, process into a voice recording, doodle or create interpretive art, or dance it out. Do whatever works best for you to internalize the material and make it your own.



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To the amazing team of creators and experts behind the original, *A Trusted Space*, which is why the SEL Muscles developed (2020): Chris Fitzgerald, Karin Gornick, Jules Ho, Alan Arkatov, Pedro Noguera, Mary Helen Immordino Yang, Linda Darling-Hammond, Marcy Melvin, and Pamela Cantor. And to the countless voices from the trenches—educators, parents, and young people who shared your stories: You are my why.

To Team All It Takes—current and past—what we do and have done is changing and saving lives. I could not be more grateful for the contributions of each of you. And for those who were sprinting along beside me on this book-writing journey, Tanner, Paige, Rikke, Seamus, Wendy, Courtney, Jules, Paul, Dave, Karin, and Justine, you get to catch your breath now too!

To my early readers and reviewers, even before the book was in a final form you took precious time to review it, to send thoughts and guidance. Your insights made the final version stronger and more relatable. Your endorsements are proudly shared within this book—thank you.

Finally, to my angels, the ones who believe in me no matter what: Adriane, Andy, Cindy, Courtney, Dave, David, Derek, Jill, John, Joy, Jules, Justine, Karin, Lisa, Loretta, Marcy, Rikke, Roger, Shai, Stacy, Tanner, Theresa, Wendy, and my mama, Diane—the original angel.

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CEO and founder of All It Takes®, **Lori Woodley-Langendorff, MS, PPS**, is an experiential keynote speaker, trainer, and author supporting youth and those who serve them to develop critical social-emotional literacy skills that empower them to successfully navigate their lives and support their communities through both joyful and trying times. A mother of two grown children, Lori has a combined 30+ years working as a school counselor, consultant, curriculum developer, and most recently author, creator, producer, and featured expert of the free-to-access award-winning film and curriculum series *A Trusted Space*.

Additional productions include the California Association of School Counselors' *Heartbeat* video and the national public service announcement *This Is a Trusted Space*, which aired throughout 2024 to an audience of over 1.5 billion.

Professional publications include the following:

A Trusted Space: Redirecting Grief to Growth, 2020; *A Trusted Space* film series, 2023—featured expert and producer
www.allittakes.org/atrustedspace

Building Trusted Spaces in Five Days curriculum, 2020—author
<https://www.allittakes.org/atrustedspace/redirectinggriefftogrowth>

Leadership Development Through Physical Education (LDTPE), 2015, 2024 (version 1.4)—author
www.allittakes.org/ldtpe

Shine Your Light, 2017—featured author
www.amazon.com/Shine-Your-Light-Practices-Extraordinary/dp/168350545X

Introduction

THE POWER OF SEL MUSCLES IN OUR LIVES

Each of us walks a unique path shaped by the relationships, communities, and experiences that make up our lives. These communities—families, friendships, classrooms, workplaces, and social groups—form the backdrop to our personal and collective growth. To every interaction, we bring ourselves—our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions—and these interactions create ripples that reach far beyond us, influencing everyone we encounter.

In this book, I invite you to consider “community” expansively, to include any group of people bound together through shared experiences. This includes the familiar spaces we inhabit: family dinners, classroom discussions, team meetings, work environments, team sports, and social gatherings. Within each of these communities, we share responsibility for shaping the culture and norms and supporting one another’s growth. At times, these relationships are sources of comfort and joy; at others, they bring challenges that require patience, understanding, and self-awareness.

Navigating this balance between individual growth and collective responsibility can be challenging, particularly for those of us in caregiving or educational roles. As parents, educators, carers, and mentors, we hold a unique responsibility: to guide young people toward healthy, resilient, and fulfilling adulthoods. We seek to support their growth, not only in the face of success but also through challenges and setbacks. But this role can be difficult, even overwhelming. The emotional ups and downs of guiding young people can lead to exhaustion and frustration. We may find ourselves at a loss, wondering if we’re making the difference we hope to, or questioning our ability to keep going.

“Thank you. I am a different person today than I was yesterday.”

—Parent participant in the All It Takes Parent–Educator Leadership Training, October 2024

These words capture the transformative potential of embracing a new approach to our interactions with young people, with all people actually. The quote reflects the core purpose of this book: to provide a set of tools, the SEL Muscles, that help us become not only effective guides but also more fulfilled, resilient, and empowered individuals. The SEL Muscles were created to bridge the gap between our intentions and the realities we encounter, supporting us in engaging with young people from a place of calm, compassion, and clarity. They’re not about quick fixes but about developing lasting skills that bring joy and renewed purpose to our roles and our lives in general.

WHY SEL MUSCLES?

When we think of muscles, we typically associate an image of physical muscles—that is, biceps, abs, quads, and so on that each of us has and that are in a varied state of condition and strength. We know that they get stronger when we intentionally work on them, and they get weaker when we don’t pay enough attention to them. Some of us have naturally strong muscles, and others find it frustrating that we have to work twice as hard to make any headway at all. I see the SEL Muscles in the same way: as mental muscles that need to be exercised to become stronger, more conditioned, and more flexible, making us socially, emotionally, and mentally healthier people in happier relationships.

For a physical workout, if you’re stepping into a gym for the first time ever, it’s not a good idea to go directly to the heavy weightlifting area. In fact, doing so may result in a painful outcome that causes you to give up on the process altogether. A more manageable and healthy approach would be to start small and begin building your muscles, navigating setbacks but not needing to

retreat completely because you broke your body. Building and flexing your SEL Muscles is the same: Start gently with the ones that are least familiar and the greatest challenge, give them a try, assess your progress, and step back into the workout. I promise that you will get stronger and you will experience greater ease and joy with every authentic flex of each SEL Muscle.

The purpose of the SEL Muscles is to offer practical, effective tools that provide relief, optimism, and a sense of agency for those supporting young people's development. Whether in a classroom, at home, or in a broader mentoring role, the SEL Muscles empower us to meet the evolving needs of the next generation with empathy and skill. Each SEL Muscle offers a way to approach challenges that honors both our own well-being and theirs. Even broader, it honors the well-being of all of us, from homes, to schools, to corporate boardrooms. Every one of us deserves to feel the power of the SEL Muscles!

Each SEL Muscle is designed to be accessible, powerful, and relevant, equipping us with the tools needed to build strong connections, foster resilience, and maintain clarity and calm in the face of difficult situations. While the SEL Muscles don't eliminate challenges, they allow us to navigate them with purpose and optimism. We cannot control every aspect of our relationships, but we can control how we choose to engage, respond, and grow, no matter who the other people are, young or older.

This book is organized into sections tailored specifically for educators and carers, acknowledging the unique demands of each role. Educators work within structured environments, balancing diverse personalities in a classroom and meeting the expectations of educational systems. Parents and carers, by contrast, encounter different challenges in the home, often shaped by emotional ties, family history, and enduring dynamics. These differences matter, and this book addresses the nuances of each setting, providing role-specific guidance that maximizes the effectiveness of each SEL Muscle.

While supporting young people's growth and resilience, adults who serve them can also develop a sense of ease, joy, and fulfillment in their roles. The SEL Muscles provide tools that nurture positive outcomes in young people and create environments where adults feel compelled to be aware of

**“I want my teachers
not only to notice
when I’m struggling,
but to act on it and
get me the help
I need.”**

- Student

their wellness while being more grounded and empowered. By working collaboratively and finding common ground, parents, carers, and educators can foster a balanced approach that reduces stress, builds trust, and encourages shared success. This sense of connection and purpose uplifts entire communities, allowing adults and young people alike to thrive in spaces filled with understanding, support, and mutual respect.



THE SEL MUSCLES

At the heart of this book are six core SEL Muscles.

Each SEL Muscle has a specific function, but they are designed to work together, creating an emotionally intelligent tool kit for effective communication, expanded self-awareness, and collaborative problem-solving, to name a few. These SEL Muscles support us in building and maintaining relationships that are grounded in empathy, respect, and resilience.

Here’s a brief look at each SEL Muscle and its purpose in this book:



1. Quit Taking It Personally (QTIP): Muscle #1 is about resisting the tendency to internalize the actions and words of others. Often, when people express frustration, anger, or indifference, it has more to do with their own experiences than with us. QTIP encourages us to give them the benefit of the doubt, allowing us to respond from a place of calm rather than defensiveness.



2. The Power of “I”: Muscle #2 centers on using “I” statements, which take ownership of our feelings and needs. This SEL Muscle is about creating a respectful dialogue by focusing on our own experiences rather than assigning blame or judgment. By using “I” statements, we prevent unnecessary defensiveness and model self-awareness.

3. **Ask vs. Tell:** Muscle #3 encourages us to shift from complaint-driven dialogue to constructive problem-solving. Instead of venting frustrations, we focus on understanding needs and finding solutions. Recognizing what we need and asking questions rather than making demands helps us foster a sense of collaboration and responsibility in our interactions.
4. **Storytelling:** Muscle #4 is a powerful way to build trust and connection. Rather than teaching a lesson or imparting advice, storytelling allows us to share our own experiences in a way that invites others to see themselves in our stories. This SEL Muscle strengthens empathy and emotional connection, making it easier to navigate difficult situations and conversations.
5. **Curiosity:** Muscle #5 replaces judgment with inquiry, giving us the space to explore situations with openness. This SEL Muscle helps us respond to tension and resistance with understanding rather than reaction, allowing us to hold space for the experience of others without compromising our own values.
6. **Walk the Talk:** Muscle #6 is about modeling the values we encourage in young people. It means embodying integrity, accountability, and resilience. This SEL Muscle is one of the most challenging, as it requires us to live out the lessons we hope to teach, showing young people what it looks like to embrace imperfection and personal growth. Like all the SEL Muscles, this one also supports our credibility and fulfilment with all our relationships.



EDUCATORS: HOW SEL MUSCLES TRANSFORM THE CLASSROOM

For educators, the SEL Muscles offer a practical framework for managing classroom dynamics and finding personal fulfillment, all while supporting the whole child. In recent years, educators have faced growing challenges that require advanced skill sets to meet the evolving needs of our young people while also meeting academic standards. This environment requires educators to act as teachers, relationship-builders, and role models, often without adequate training and support.



The SEL Muscles can make a significant difference in this context, helping educators manage their own stress while fostering a positive classroom culture. For example, QTIP helps teachers remain calm when faced with student outbursts, preventing escalation and demonstrating emotional regulation. Similarly, the Power of “I” allows teachers to address behavioral issues without assigning blame, reducing defensiveness and encouraging students to reflect on their actions.

The benefits of the SEL Muscles extend beyond behavior management. When educators use Ask vs. Tell, they invite students to take ownership of their actions and learning, creating a collaborative environment where students feel respected and involved. Storytelling allows teachers to connect with students on a personal level, sharing experiences that build trust and empathy. Walk the Talk is particularly important for educators, as students are quick to notice inconsistencies between what adults say and do. By modeling the behaviors they value, educators build credibility and set an example that students are more likely to follow.

PARENTS AND CARERS: HOW SEL MUSCLES STRENGTHEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

For parents and carers, the SEL Muscles offer a framework for building strong, trusting relationships with young people. Family life brings unique challenges, shaped by deep emotional ties, shared history, and the ongoing demands of daily life. Unlike educators, parents are not only guides but also companions in young people’s lives, witnessing both their highs and their lows.

The SEL Muscles provide tools for managing these complexities with compassion and consistency.

At home, **QTIP** helps parents avoid taking hurtful words or challenging behavior personally, allowing them to respond with empathy rather than defensiveness. This can be especially important during adolescence, when young people often test boundaries and express frustration in ways that can feel personal.

The Power of “I” enables parents to communicate their feelings without assigning blame, creating space for open dialogue. Instead of saying, “You never listen to me,” a parent might say, “I feel unheard when we talk about this.” This shift reduces tension and models accountability, helping young people understand the impact of their actions.

Ask vs. Tell transforms family dynamics by shifting from complaint-driven dialogue to collaborative problem-solving. By understanding our needs that delve into collaborative problem-solving rather than complaining about what is not done, parents encourage young people to take responsibility for their well-being and actions and contribute to solutions. For instance, instead of saying, “You need to keep your room clean,” a parent might note: “I need for our home to be a healthy environment. This includes your room. What do you think would help you keep your room cleaner and more organized?”

Storytelling is equally powerful in the family setting. By sharing personal stories of challenge, fear, or joy, parents create a trusted space for young people to express themselves without fear of judgment. Rather than focusing on the lesson or moral of the story, storytelling emphasizes emotional connection and shared experience. For example, a parent might share an experience of feeling scared in a new situation, focusing on how it felt rather than what happened or how they “fixed it.” This shift from “here’s what I learned” to “this is what I felt” helps young people feel understood and valued, knowing that they’re not alone in their experiences. Storytelling, in this way, fosters understanding and trust, allowing for a deeper relationship that can weather the challenges of family life.

It’s clear that these tools are not only practical; they’re transformative. They’re designed to support those of us who guide, teach, and nurture young people by enhancing our ability to connect, communicate, and grow with them and each other.

The SEL Muscles remind us that progress, not perfection, is the goal. Just as with physical muscles, the SEL Muscles require consistent, mindful use and a willingness to embrace growth over time. The strength of each SEL Muscle comes from regular practice, and the benefits are cumulative: greater ease, deeper relationships, and a sense of purpose and fulfillment in our work and families.

Throughout this book, you'll find exercises, stories, and examples tailored to both educators and carers. Each chapter will explore a specific SEL Muscle, offering insights and strategies for flexing it in ways that resonate with your unique role, whether that's in the classroom, at home, or in the community. You'll also find the Notice Choose Act® framework integrated into each SEL Muscle's exploration, providing a structured way to observe your responses, make intentional choices, and act in ways that support positive outcomes for you.

**The journey you're embarking on is
as much about self-discovery as it
is about serving young people.**

By strengthening these SEL Muscles, you're investing not only in young people's well-being but also in your own. Together, these tools allow you to build a life where connection, empathy, and resilience flourish—a life where you can meet challenges with confidence and joy, knowing that your actions truly matter.

As we move forward, let's embrace the opportunity to grow, flexing each SEL Muscle with purpose and patience. Whether in times of ease or challenge, the SEL Muscles offer a path toward greater understanding, collaboration, and fulfillment.

**So, take a deep breath, roll up your sleeves,
and get ready to dive in. Let's start building
the foundation for a life of purpose, joy,
and connection, one SEL Muscle at a time.**



NOTICE.CHOOSE.ACT.®

Another way to think about it: **Awareness. Intention. Results.**

It's easy to take in new ideas—whether through reading or listening—and feel a spark of inspiration, nodding along and thinking, “Yes, that’s exactly what I need!” In those moments, it’s tempting to believe that this fresh insight will transform our lives. But once we’re back in the flow of everyday routines, that spark fades, and the idea quietly retreats to the background. Occasionally, it whispers, “You should give it a try,” or nags, “You know things would be better if you were doing that.” Yet without action, these whispers can lead to a sense of frustration, even self-doubt, slowly chipping away at our confidence and sense of achievement.

After years of working with students and families, I’ve seen first-hand the importance of having instructions that go beyond “Do this” or “Don’t do that.” Real change—especially in behaviors and attitudes—requires more than just orders or suggestions. Telling middle school students or siblings to “be nice” seldom reshapes their actions or the way they treat each other. ***True transformation comes not from commands but from practical tools and intentional practice.***

NOTICE CHOOSE ACT: THE FRAMEWORK TO ACHIEVE SEL MUSCLE MASTERY

This same principle applies to the SEL Muscles. You might feel a pull to try flexing one of them, but in the heat of a challenging moment—when a young person is testing your limits or a colleague has dismissed your ideas—having the knowledge alone won't necessarily help you access it. That's where Notice Choose Act (NCA) comes into play. This framework helps you develop awareness of the impact that using, or not using, a particular SEL Muscle has on both yourself and those around you. With this awareness comes a powerful sense of agency, allowing you to shift from autopilot reactions to intentional responses, creating outcomes that reflect the values you aim to bring to each interaction. The NCA framework is a tool for problem-solving and productive decision-making, and it can transform how you approach challenging situations and relationships with yourself and others.

TRY THIS to understand the concept of moving from autopilot to intentional action.

1. Cross your arms. (Yes, it's that simple.)

Notice and reflect:

- Was that hard?
- Did you have to think about it?
- What did it take to do it?

2. Uncross your arms and shake them out. Then cross them backwards (put the opposite arm on top).

Notice and reflect:

- Was that hard? (Maybe awkward.)
- Did you have to think about it? (Usually, yes.)
- What did it take to do it? (Intention, thinking, and purposeful action.)

Change can be awkward, unsettling, and sometimes challenging. But it usually only takes remembering to cross backwards to keep us moving forward!



NOTICE.

As you dive deeper into each of the SEL Muscles, you will notice that I use the word *notice* often. Noticing is the practice of becoming aware. Without the Notice step, nothing really ever changes. Nothing gets invented, improved, corrected, fixed, or even celebrated. It may seem a simple concept, but in a world where many folks are on autopilot most of the time, the purposeful act of noticing creates epiphanies that allow openings for change.

There are three categories where noticing happens:

1. Ourselves

- What do we notice about ourselves? What are we doing or experiencing?
- How are we feeling? What are our behaviors?

2. Others

- What do we notice about others? How are they feeling and acting?
- What do they need? How do they influence us and others?

3. Environment

- What is our footprint?
- What does the environment need to be safer and healthier for all? (This can be both the environment we interact with and ecosystems at large.)

In each of the following chapters you will have the opportunity to explore what you notice about the SEL Muscle and how it plays a role in the outcomes you experience. I invite you to follow the reflection guide to open your awareness beyond what might lie on the surface and uncover what you feel and the behaviors that follow those feelings. Only in this awareness can you purposely identify what you are currently experiencing and determine what you might want instead.

Educator Examples

"I notice that I feel ineffective teaching almost every day. I notice I spend more time redirecting student behavior than delivering a fun and engaging lesson that I planned."

"I feel disappointed, defeated, unsupported, helpless, angry, and exhausted."

"My behaviors, words, and attitudes are cranky, isolating, impatient, and snappy."

Parent Examples

"I notice that every evening our home is chaotic as we work to get homework, dinner, showers, and bedtime done."

"I feel unhappy, frustrated, unsupported, angry, and overwhelmed."

"My behaviors, words, and attitudes are short, critical, aggressive, dismissive, and withdrawn."

CHOOSE.

Once we identify clearly what we are noticing, how we feel and behave, we can articulate what we want instead, if anything. If we like what we are aware of, we can keep on the same path.

Alternatively, if what we notice does not bring us personal or professional joy, ease, satisfaction, reasons to celebrate, and so on, then we can purposely choose something else.

The Choose step is a purposeful consideration of options that define what we desire rather than what we have. Using the examples in Notice, here is how Choose might look:

Educator Examples

"I choose to be successful in teaching my carefully planned, thoughtful, and fun lessons."

"I feel successful, connected, motivated, energized, productive, and creative."

"My behaviors, words, and attitudes are welcoming, considerate, curious, patient, and caring."

Parent Examples

"I choose an easy, fun, and connected evening with my family."

"I feel calm, happy, effective, valued, and respected."

"My behaviors, words, and attitudes are fun, helpful, connected, accepting, and engaged."

When comparing what each of these examples started as in Notice with where they got to in Choose, which one would you want to live in? If you created the atmosphere in Choose, would it serve you and your well-being? Would it serve the young people you steward? If your answer is yes, great!

There's just one catch . . .

Notice and Choose are both cerebral. They live in our minds, and nothing ever changes outwardly because of them. Just noticing that we are not happy doesn't make us happy. Similarly, choosing to be happy doesn't make us happy. Having awareness and setting intentions are great, but often we fall short on the follow-through. They can be like a New Year's resolution: We identify (notice) what we want to do differently or create in a new year, and then we set the intention of (choose) the results we'd like to achieve.

And then . . . 360 days later we notice the same thing. The same resolution is still on the list because the result didn't happen. Have you ever stopped making resolutions because at the end of the year you felt bad that the outcomes you'd resolved for didn't happen? Many of us can identify with this cycle. Another way to think about it is this:

Intention Without Action Is Fantasy!

This brings us to the third step, Act.

ACT.

Results only happen in action. Our actions determine outcomes. Sometimes the outcomes are what we want them to be, other times they exceed our desires, and sometimes they fall short. Regardless, when we embrace that we are in control of our actions and accept the results that follow, we develop a greater sense of personal agency and self-determination. We model for ourselves and others what accountability and responsibility look like, and we rise to greater versions of ourselves, often in previously unimaginable ways.

When learning Choose and Act, participants sometimes merge or misunderstand the difference between the two. I want to be sure I leave you with clarity that supports your accurate engagement with the NCA framework.

Many training frameworks speak to the power of intention to create results (which I call Choose). They cultivate a belief that intention will get us where we want to be. In the NCA framework a small but mighty shift in perspective changes this belief from the intention being “how” results happen to “what” one wants to happen. What we notice and choose determines the direction of our actions, and those actions

determine the results. In the NCA framework, actions need to be three things:

1. Carefully and thoughtfully determined
2. Specific and measurable
3. Practical and attainable

Actions need to be *carefully and thoughtfully determined* to match the results desired. For instance, a teacher looking to improve their self-care by improving quality of sleep might not find much success by simply heading to bed early if they didn't set their life up so their mind could relax.

Actions need to be *specific and measurable*. Clarity is critical so we know exactly what we will be doing and can measure the effectiveness of the action. It is important to use phrases like "I will" and avoid phrases like "I'll try." The action needs to be measurable so it is clear whether it was done or not done as committed. For example, "I will complete all my professional and personal responsibilities by 7:00 p.m. each evening so my mind feels settled as I head to bed by 9:30. If I am unable to complete them by 7:00, I will make a plan to complete them the next day so I am not worrying about it through the night."

Actions need to be *practical and attainable*. If impractical or unattainable, actions will fade into the recesses of our minds and become excuses for why we did not achieve the results we were looking for. This is very personal to each person as we all have different lives and responsibilities. No one knows your day and your story like you do, so only you can determine what is practical and attainable. I invite you to consider that, if it is too easy, it is likely what you are already doing. A growth edge must be a part of the equation. I call this going two steps further than you believe you can or that you want to go. If you typically go to sleep at midnight and get up constantly tired at 6, it might not be practical or attainable to say you will start going to bed by 9:30. However two steps might be turning off all stimulation by 9:30 and heading to bed by 10:30.

Let's look at a few action steps that complete the examples in Notice and Choose.

Educator Actions

- Have a candid conversation with your classes using the SEL Muscles to ask for support solving the struggle.
- Bring contagiously fun and welcoming energy to the classroom—do not let them steal your joy.
- Ask colleagues and administrators for ideas that work for them to engage challenging students.

Parent Actions

- Have a family huddle and share your real feelings using the SEL Muscles and ask for their ideas and support.
- Take small breaks from being responsible for others and take care of yourself. For example, go on a 10-minute walk, relax in a hot shower, or spend 10 minutes on a puzzle you love.
- Learn more about your kids' dreams and share more of your dreams with them.



Using the NCA framework as you seek to shift perspectives, attitudes, actions, and ultimately results will give you an independently designed way forward. The process respects your intelligence and your ability to design your life in ways that make sense to you. Use the framework faithfully at first, exploring what you notice, designing what you choose, and then acting in ways that accomplish your desires. After you begin to experience results that feel great, I expect you will move through the steps quicker and perhaps even a little bit differently. This is not a rigid

process; instead, it is a guide for you to master your SEL Muscles and live with more joy and vibrancy, whatever that looks like for you.

Let's dive into the SEL Muscles!

MUSCLE #1

Quit Taking It Personally (QTIP)



INTRODUCTION TO QTIP

The first SEL Muscle, and often the one that lays the groundwork for all the others, is Quit Taking It Personally, also humorously known as QTIP. I think it is safe to say that as parents, guardians, and educators, and in all other roles that are in service to our young, we are deeply invested in their well-being and success. While there are some disputes on the role of the education system in the overall social-emotional-mental well-being of our young people, there typically is agreement that collectively we want our young people to grow into healthy adults. We want them to successfully navigate things like getting and keeping a job; having healthy, happy relationships with partners, family, friends, and coworkers; and being a conscientious citizen, all while having the resilience to overcome disappointments and setbacks that are bound to happen over the course of a lifetime.

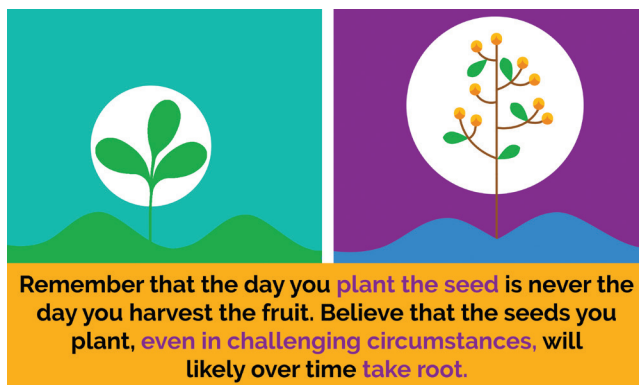


Over the last few years we've been blatantly reminded of the need for resilience and the consequences of a lack of it.

We need to be able to navigate the next pandemic, fire, flood, hurricane, or other natural disaster; the next social justice or civil rights movement; constant differences of opinion and lifestyles; and so many other obstacles that range from small to seemingly insurmountable. The consequences that arise from a lack of resilience and tools to move through challenging times are evident in today's statistics: increasing mental illness, increasing hurtful behaviors, increasing attempts and suicide, increasing detachment from social situations, increasing lack of general consideration for other people, and the growing list of untenable conditions.

QTIP is one tool that allows us to personally navigate challenges and in turn teach our young ones to do the same. From the line at the grocery store or behind the too-slow driver, to your relationships with your children, students, colleagues, and families, it is a game-changer.

QTIP FOR EDUCATORS



Keeping in mind what we want for our young people and the effort those of us in education make to ensure this outcome, it can feel almost impossible to not take things personally. When our dedicated efforts, both tangible (lesson planning, delivery, grading, meetings, etc.) and in the depth of heart (caring deeply about your students' current and future lives), seem unappreciated, unrecognized, and even challenged, it can feel very personal, even when logically we know that it is not.

Opportunities for us to take specific things personally can exist in any workday, and they can take many forms. It could be a student acting out in class, a parent yelling at you that you're the reason their child isn't performing well, an administrator who makes demands that are outside of your control, or even when you haven't reached a certain student, no matter how hard you've tried. All of these have the potential to disrupt your sense of purpose and success, often resulting in resentment, burnout, and disconnection from the very thing you want: to see your students succeed.

For me, QTIP is the hardest SEL Muscle to keep flexing with strength and conviction. In my first year as a school counselor (in my late 20s), I had an angry mom verbally assault me during a meeting. Every profanity I have ever heard came at me; accusations that I did not care about her daughter reverberated off the walls, her voice just shy of screaming. There was absolutely zero entry point in which I could respond, and to be honest I was shocked. I had worked hours with her daughter trying everything I knew, everything my boss knew, everything her teachers knew, and everything we could all think of that we had never tried before. Her daughter was still truant, failing, and physically aggressive to other students. We weren't giving up; we were trying to bring mom and daughter (she was in the meeting with us) into creative problem-solving.

At that moment, in that meeting, problem-solving was not going to happen. I was shaken up by the barrage, but I was not taking the accusations personally. For me, the behavior from the mother was so egregious that I was able to



see that it was not about me. While I had no desire to ever go through that again (the principal and superintendent set new boundaries for her), I also could separate myself from the pain this mom was obviously experiencing and her consequent combative behavior.

However, there were other times when I did take things personally, and the results hampered my joy, my desire to solve problems creatively, and my ability to be the best version of myself both in and out of work. The people who paid for this (outside of myself) were the ones I cared for the most, my family at home. When we are unable to separate ourselves and we take things personally that are not ours to carry, the effects spread in ways that cause additional strain and upset.

Occasionally, there was an adult in my work life who had me personalizing experiences and causing unnecessary upset as a result. There were colleagues who didn't like that I was hired instead of their friend and who worked hard to prevent me from being successful, teachers who gossiped behind my back and insulted me in front of other teachers, and hostile parents who felt it acceptable to use a verbal battering ram to demonstrate their upset. There were times when I was so shocked and "hurt" at their actions—I felt affronted that

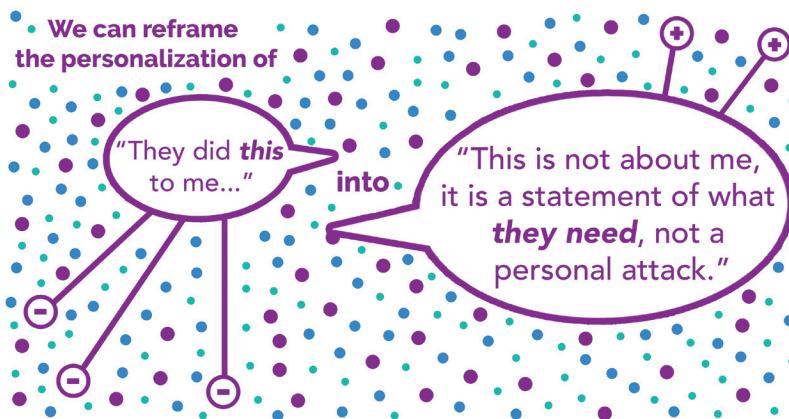
1. **they believed I was "against" them or their students rather than "for" them, or**
2. **they would not constructively bring their issues to me directly.**

My responses often included my own little tantrums such as defiant or sulky withdrawal. Of course, the person I was hurting most was me, affecting my moods, my confidence, and my ability to offer my strongest skills, such as creative problem-solving, and bringing my vibrant inclusive personality to all situations. Taking things personally reduced my verve for life and my job, made me less confident, and eroded my happiness, both at home and at work.

After years of practice, I am better at QTIPing, and with each successful flex I feel more ease, joy, and renewed connection to my purpose. I am better able to leave work at work and be a

happy grounded person at home. As hard as it may be to remember, the reality is that whatever is coming at us is a statement about the other person's needs and what they are going through, not an indication of anything lacking on our part. We may not be able to diffuse every situation by not taking it personally, but we will be able to move through our days with more ease and peace of mind, which can make a tremendous difference in how our work feels, how our days go, how emotionally stable we are, how much sleep we get, and the list goes on.

At the core of QTIP is giving the benefit of the doubt to others.



This does not excuse ugly words or behaviors, and it does not dismiss the fact that sometimes boundaries need to be set to mitigate further poor behaviors. In the story of the verbally aggressive mother, boundaries were set, and she no longer had access to anyone without district-level personnel present. We deserved to feel safe, and it was not our problem that she had an issue with it.

The goal is to not tie ourselves up in feeling victimized and defensive. We give grace by offering the assumption that others have needs that we can't always meet. QTIP allows us to move on with our journey without the baggage of the expectations of others, while still being able to care about the humanity of the other person.

Sometimes you may be able to determine motives and what other people need, and sometimes you may have no idea, but it is helpful to remember that even if you don't understand, it's still not about you.

About seven years into my school counselor career I had an amazing opportunity to take a job in a place I wanted to be and work for a woman I wanted to work for. I had three interviews, one with a large team of administrators and teachers at the school site I was applying to. It was nerve-racking, and because I wanted it so much, I added a huge amount of unneeded pressure to the process. In the larger group interview I could feel a bit of unsettling energy, but the overall warmth of the others made the process easier, and I was able to sink into the questions with confidence. I was good at what I did. I was different and creative in my approach with students, and I knew that if they were interested in “outside the box” thinking, I would have the job. I did get the job, and on my first day I was greeted warmly by everyone except my partner in the counseling office. She made it abundantly clear from the start that she was in charge (on paper we were equals), that things needed to be her way (I was hired to be different), and that she was not interested in anything I had to say. Within a few days I was taking it all so personally that I was in tears.

“What did I do?”

“Why doesn't she like me?”

“What can I do to make this better?”

(Backwards somersaults while offering to do all her mundane tasks came to mind.)

This great new job had become a daily barrage of her demands and me trying to dodge them, all while feeling sorry for myself and ill equipped to handle it. It all came down to me feeling pity for myself, which impacted my confidence, which impacted my

approach with her, which became an unhealthy cycle. I now look back and shake my head, thinking,

“Oh girl, you were taking her actions personally instead of understanding that she was unhappy that her friend did not get the job. She had a plan, and it didn’t happen. This was about her, not about you.”

Today I would handle the situation very differently, and I would not take her issues personally. I would use the communication skills I have honed (mostly) by now. In the end it still may not have worked out, but I would have felt better about myself, cried less, not taken the upheaval home with me, been more fun to be around, and not tried so hard to change someone else. I knew in my heart it was not my issue, but I made it about me anyway. About two years in there was a change, and I got a new counseling partner. A few weeks after she started, she sat me down and shared that she was the happiest ever in her new position. She said that she expected to be arriving in a hellish situation, based on what she was told. The final result was good all around for seven years until I left for a new opportunity. I later realized that those two years never had to be so miserable—I did that to myself.

How Often Does the Need to QTIP Show Up in Our Lives?

Whether it is a critical parent or colleague, a seemingly ungrateful young person, or even someone who cuts us off in traffic, doesn’t return our call, or seems to not understand our needs, the opportunities to take something personally can rack up. In these situations, and thousands more, our decision to QTIP, or not, equals our ability to tap into our most authentic and joyful selves.

Do our students and children know how to get under our skin? Do they study us for our vulnerabilities and use them against us when they choose to? Do they lash out at us because they have poor coping mechanisms?

The reality is that the answer to all of the questions is yes. Our young people can be unthoughtful and at times even mean; they can trigger us in countless ways, both intentionally and unintentionally. Sometimes they can fail to see our own humanity and the ways that they are baiting us, while at other times they do recognize that we are human and can feel hurt, and they purposely aim for our softest spots.

No matter what they toss at us or how they toss it, if we can remain calm and confident during their storms, many of the upsets that often turn to power struggles can be mitigated or defused.

Because we care so deeply, and we believe in young people's highest potential, hurtful behaviors and words feel *so* personal. But are they? Let's consider this: Whenever we are on the receiving end of upsets that result in hurtful language, attitudes, and behaviors that feel personal, it is a statement about the young (or adult) person's unresolved needs, rather than a statement about any lack on our part. We may not understand the reasons why the student is lashing out, not listening, or failing to follow expectations, but we can know that they, at that moment, do not have the skills, maturity, tools, or understanding to react in a better way. We can offer the benefit of the doubt that they are experiencing gaps in an ability to appropriately handle whatever is happening emotionally inside them. Reasons for this can include what I refer to as a neuro-hijack of the amygdala (the fight, flight, or freeze center of the brain). Sometimes it is learned behavior, and sometimes it's a myriad of reasons all lumped together. Whatever the reason, a person's response is on them.

Understanding this does not mean we are approving the actions that are happening; it simply means we do not have to carry the weighted burden that personalizing creates. This provides the freedom that allows us to approach challenges with greater empathy, patience, and self-care.

SO, NOW WHAT?

If we don't personalize others' behaviors as an attack on us, does that mean we always need to take the proverbial high road? No, we do not. We need to hold our students accountable. Our job goes beyond simply teaching them academic skills. We are guiding them to be caring and conscientious members of society, one where we understand and embrace that our actions can deeply impact others. We do them, and ourselves, a disservice when we let too much slide.

Then there's the "ouch" that we need to be cautious of. This is the slippery slope of disengaging so much from their actions that we excuse ourselves from looking at our own impact and being willing to make shifts that serve us and them. While their actions are a statement of need, our words and actions can be supportive of healthy resolutions for them, or they can be dismissive and cold, like wiping our hands clean and saying, "not my problem." Somewhere, after we calmly realize it is not personal, and before dismissal, is a sweet spot where we can love the person, not take their actions personally, and be a space for that person to safely evolve into a healthier version of themselves.

Therein lies the conundrum: How do we know what to let slide and what to use as teachable opportunities? And how does Muscle #1, QTIP, play into these often split-second decisions?

Educators have always worn many hats that exist outside of the classroom curriculum, such as conflict resolution mediator, recess supervisor, disciplinarian, parent, and so on, and today we add social-emotional and mental health practitioner to the list. We take on so many roles that were not necessarily part of the educator job that we thought we signed up for. Emotional resilience is more necessary than ever in the field of teaching, and your students may push you to limits you had never planned to stretch yourself to. This is why QTIP may be the SEL Muscle that best preserves your mental health and your joy. If you can get good at flexing Muscle #1, you can go home every day with a deeper sense of ease. You can know that

1. you did the best you could at extending understanding and a willingness to reach every student, and
2. you're not letting anything that is "not going right" get under your skin. You're not a miracle worker—you're

a human being in a position with a lot riding on your shoulders, and you deserve to feel as though your efforts are valued and you are doing “enough.”

As you know well, teaching is more than just imparting knowledge; it’s a profession intertwined with emotions, empathy, and a deep-rooted passion for nurturing growth.

Our students are watching everything we do.

Students notice not just what we say or what we are teaching, but also our attitudes, our ability to be fair and just, who we call on in class—everything! And while they are watching our every move, we cannot begin to keep up with all of them in a similar way. We do what we can to fill in the blanks about what we know about them, and use the information to direct how we interact with them. But we still never know what is truly driving their behaviors. Rationally, we know that the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students contribute to a myriad of emotions, behaviors, and responses within the classroom. What might be considered disrespectful in one culture could be deemed acceptable in another. Ideally, teachers can navigate these cultural nuances without allowing personal sentiments to cloud their judgment. What might be typical behavior for a student can change if something in their life changes (they break up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, their parents are getting divorced, a pet dies, etc.). We do our best to know what is going on with our students—the things that could be affecting their ability to learn and adhere to classroom expectations—but in reality we are just putting some pieces of the puzzle in place while knowing that much of it is a mystery to us. **By practicing not taking it personally, we are protecting our own peace and modeling for our students how to regulate emotions.**

**Defensiveness is the great instigator of
power struggles. I know that sometimes
students can literally work your last nerve,**

but if you can often flex the SEL Muscle of not taking it personally, you will find that they cannot affect you as deeply. You can create a necessary buffer for yourself while still validating their experience (this skill is developed in the next SEL Muscles!).

I am certainly not saying it will be easy, but I am definitely saying that it will serve you, and your sanity, well.

Many of us in education feel as though we give and give, and when our work is not honored, not appreciated, and at times even criticized and dismissed, it is hard not to take that personally. But again, you can recognize that a student's inability to see your value because of what they are going through doesn't change how powerfully committed you are. And they may even be seeing your hard work and your efforts but won't let on that they do. If you're teaching middle or high school, you know that adolescence is a turbulent phase marked by hormonal fluctuations, peer pressure, and the quest for identity. These factors, and many more, can cause students to act out, exhibit defiance, and challenge authority figures, not out of malice toward the teacher but as a manifestation of their own inner struggles. Recognizing this helps you avoid internalizing such behaviors as personal attacks.

The ability to detach emotionally from the challenges and setbacks inherent in schools is essential for preserving your mental well-being. Teaching can be emotionally taxing, with educators often bearing the weight of their students' struggles, and their struggles are increasing. By reframing setbacks as opportunities for reflection and growth rather than personal failures, teachers can safeguard their emotional health. This SEL Muscle will most likely require daily flexing, but that is how we create new autopilot habits.

And of course it is not only students who can trigger us. It can be parents, colleagues, administration, policymakers, and the list goes on. Sometimes teachers may face criticism

or complaints from parents, and even community members, regarding their teaching methods, grading policies, or interactions with students. While feedback from parents can be invaluable, more and more often it is expressed in aggressive ways, crossing the line of what is appropriate behavior toward another person. While these approaches are hurtful and need to be managed, often with help from leadership, it is essential for educator well-being and effectiveness not to take it personally, as challenging as that is. By not personalizing the other person's poor behavior we have the gift of staying grounded and calm, remaining professional and committed to addressing concerns constructively. If the other party does not meet us there, at least they did not have the power to raise our blood pressure, affect our mood, and derail our promise to cultivate a healthy future for the student in question. Remembering to offer the emotionally reactive parent or carer the benefit of the doubt is important and helps us step back from personalizing the behavior as an affront. Sometimes that can mean repeating statements like these:



Although the statements will be different, we may use them when we encounter conflicts or disagreements with colleagues, whether it's regarding instructional approaches, classroom management strategies, or administrative decisions. In such situations, it's important to recognize that differences of opinion are natural and should be handled with mutual respect and collaboration. In some cases, we may disagree with administrative decisions regarding curriculum changes, scheduling, or disciplinary actions. While it's natural to have personal opinions,

it's essential to not take these decisions personally. In all these situations, flexing your QTIP SEL Muscle by focusing on student needs and growth and resisting internalizing external factors as personal affronts is crucial for your well-being and your effectiveness in the classroom.

By reframing setbacks as opportunities for reflection and growth rather than personal failures, teachers can safeguard their emotional health.

QTIP FOR FAMILIES AND CARERS



Can our children push our buttons? Does the sun rise every day? Goodness, our kids can be professional button-pushers (Olympic-worthy ones in fact)! We can't kick them out of class, and there is no principal to send them to. We are the ultimate

authority figure, often going it alone, and they can be relentless in their attempts to achieve what they want. So how do we maintain boundaries, rules, and our own sanity?

As a parent myself, I know how challenging it can be to not take things our children (no matter their age) do or say personally. Like every SEL Muscle, some are stronger than others. It has taken me a long time and many setbacks to be good (most of the time) at flexing Muscle #1. Our kids mean the world to us, and we do everything we can, with the tools we have, to navigate their development in ways we hope will set them in the right direction for living a happy, healthy, responsible, resilient, dream-driven life. My grown kids would likely tell you that I took too many things personally and that I was not as effective meeting all their needs as I might have been had I been better at QTIPing. The strategies I developed over decades were born out of a desire to (1) do a better job myself and (2) support other parents and carers in finding successful outcomes. I was fortunate to work with young people and their families and could typically separate myself from taking personally what others did and said better than I could with my own children. When it is so close to home, it feels much more personal, because while we might put heart and soul into others at work, no outcome is truly as important as our own children's well-being. I see you, fellow parents, and I know the value of strengthening this SEL Muscle and the pain of its weakness.

Does this sound familiar to you? You come home after a long day with groceries needing to be unloaded and put away, dinner cooked, homework checked, laundry folded and put away—all the things. You hope beyond hope that when you get home the dishwasher is empty, trash is out, and homework is ready to be checked. You might even feel false hope because you are already resigned to the argument that will happen when those things are not done, and you lose your resolve to stay calm. Or you simply withdraw, do all the things, get a little bit (if lucky) of sleep, and start it all over again in the morning. You think you are good at hiding how deeply personal this is to you, how much resentment is growing, how ineffective you feel as a parent and a person. You want so deeply for your kids to show some care for you as you care so much about them. If they cared, they would certainly want to make your life easier and would do it without being asked, without an argument. Wouldn't they?!

As hard as it can be to remember, your children don't do things because of you; they do things because of them. As personal as it feels—and it can feel so personal—it is always about them and what they are struggling to navigate.

Ultimately, this whole thing is nothing but a bunch of “stuff happening,” but we rationalize it as a bunch of “stuff happening to us!”

As soon as we identify with it this way, we have given up our power, upending all good communication and learning opportunities, and we act in ways that do not model how we hope our kids will act and speak when they are feeling frustrated, unsupported, and unseen.

We inadvertently put on them, or others, the responsibility for our contentment when we personalize their actions or they watch us do that with others. In exhaustion, overwhelm, high stress, and all the other emotions we feel from time to time (or often), we can easily forget that our kids do not inherently owe us anything. We set the culture of our family. Our moods, words, and actions are what they learn from, and how we navigate expectations and responses is up to us, separate from what they do and say. When we find ourselves saying, “They made me . . .,” we know we are personalizing something and that the results will steal any opportunity for peace of mind and upend our ability to respond to family dynamics with confidence and calm.

Understanding that children go through phases of growth and learning can prevent us from internalizing our child's behavior as a personal attack. The more we know of developmental behavior and general expectations by age range, the more we can separate unrealistic expectations from realistic ones. Of course, this is cerebral information that can get lost in the fray when our child is telling us they hate us, or they are outwitting us with illogical logic. Nevertheless, it is still solid wisdom to lean on when needed, which can be most days.

Another example of a common carer QTIP challenge I heard regularly as a school counselor talking to families revolved around appreciation and expectations. As parents, we offer so much to our children and often have unspoken needs (until we are at our wit's end, and then it doesn't go well) that we assume our kids should know and honor. For instance, we go day after day

cooking, cleaning, packing lunches, acting as chauffeur, helping with homework, and supporting hobbies, all while working and trying to maintain some minimal form of personal pursuits. Our kids may not see all of this as something to appreciate; it is just expected to happen. Resentment might build as they ask for more and more without recognizing what they have and how we make it all happen. The “ouch” here is that we create this expectation and then, often in the child’s teenage years, come to personalize perceived disregard for our efforts.

At that point the way we communicate pushes them away, and we find ourselves in power struggles. It might sound something like this:

- “You don’t appreciate anything I do for you.”
- “I do so much for you, and all you do is ask for more and more!”
- “After all I do for you, you can’t even take out the trash without giving me a hard time?”

Muscles #2 and #3 will give us additional tools to communicate more effectively in these situations.

At times it can feel extremely personal. Your child can say to you: “You’re the worst mother ever! I wish I’d never been born or I’d been born to a different family. I hate you!” This can certainly feel as though it is being directed solely at you, and can feel like it is attacking something with extremely high stakes.

But if you can take a step back and ideally a deep breath (or a few), you can see that your child is lashing out because of something that they need; they’re not actually making a harsh commentary on how well you are caring for them. In some cases, what they think they need may be that they don’t want to do their homework, they want to stay up late, they don’t want to get off their electronics, and so on. You get to play the often unpopular role of “making them do things” that they don’t want to do. So although they may lash out at you for it, it is still a statement of them navigating big feelings around not being

able to do what they want to, not that you are actually a terrible parent or carer.

QTIP has no guarantees that you can stop these power struggles, but **it can save your sanity**. If you were to take everything personally that your young person directs at you, your nervous system would become compromised in a short period of time. What QTIP ideally does is grant you more serenity and ease. You can become more like a duck: Water literally rolls off their backs, keeping them dry, warm, and afloat. They are able to do this because of a special gland that makes them water resistant. QTIP can act in the same way for you, where you apply it to situations and are able to keep your mental health intact and afloat.

IS IT ALWAYS EASY? NO.

Does it get easier the more that you flex the QTIP SEL Muscle—the more that you apply the awareness that it is not actually about you? Yes. It also lays the groundwork for all the other SEL Muscles that follow, and it can become an SEL Muscle that saves your state of mind, time and time again. While we all can be responsible and continue developing stronger SEL Muscles, it is important to do our best to remind ourselves that our child's behavior is not a direct reflection of how well you are raising and caring for them. Understanding that behavior is separate from a child's inherent value can prevent us from taking negative behaviors personally. Trying to see situations from the child's perspective can help us empathize with their feelings and the motivations behind their behavior. Recognizing that a child's actions are most often driven by emotions, needs, or developmental challenges can assist us from feeling personally attacked.

**When our children aren't well regulated,
it is our job to remain calm, not join into
their agitated state. As the saying goes,
be the thermostat, not the thermometer.**

BOUNDARIES

Another tool that is game-changing is making sure we set, and hold, boundaries! This one can be hard but is so necessary. Establishing clear boundaries and expectations for behavior (including how appreciations are handled) can help us address challenging behaviors without taking them personally. By focusing on holding the line on boundaries rather than interpreting behavior as a reflection of our skills or an interpretation of what they are, or are not, thinking can help us maintain a sense of objectivity resulting in refined responses that mitigate relationship challenges.

Remember that you are not alone! As families and carers, we can sometimes silo ourselves off, thinking that no one is going through the drama that we are at home. You may even be embarrassed to admit to others how close you can be to your wit's end with a child. Connecting with other families, joining parenting groups, or seeking guidance from counselors or therapists can provide you with validation and support. Sharing experiences with others can help you realize that you are not alone in facing challenges and can offer alternative perspectives. And observing our current statistics, you have plenty of others to find community with.

Just as educators do, families and carers need to examine their own personal triggers. Recognizing our own reactions and emotional responses to our child's behavior can help us to identify any personal triggers or insecurities that may contribute to taking things personally. Developing this self-awareness can give you insight to respond to challenging situations more effectively.

Instead of dwelling on feelings of hurt or frustration, it is helpful to focus on finding constructive solutions to address your reaction and management to your child's behavior. A few ideas on this are here:

1. Collaborate with your child to problem-solve and develop strategies for managing challenging behavior.

This can create a new sense of cooperation and understanding between adults and children. Crazy as it sounds, our children have a hard time seeing us as whole people, not just extensions of themselves. Asking our children their thoughts and their ideas for solutions is powerful and enlightening. They are often harder on themselves than we would ever be once we offer them a space to share openly.

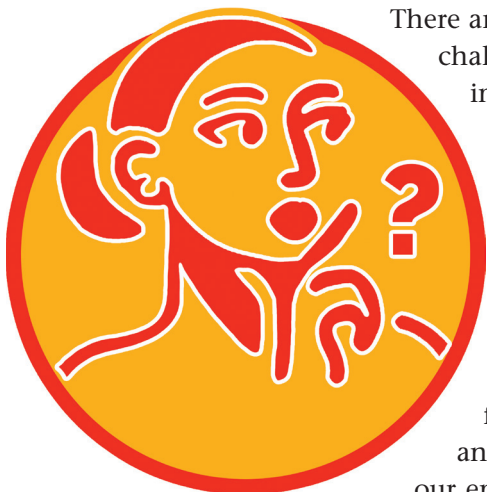
2. Ask others what they think, and ask them to be honest.

While this initially may feel risky and vulnerable, the insights of others we trust (they will love us and our kids even when things go wrong) or respect (they have street and/or professional credibility that gives them knowledge and separation to see things more clearly than we can when we are swimming in the muddy waters of emotional upset and paralyzed into doing nothing in fear of doing it wrong) are invaluable. Asking others develops trust and collaboration, easing the journey and making it feel much less lonely.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

I know it can be so hard, as sometimes we barely feel like we can go to the bathroom by ourselves or we tiptoe to prevent any kind of upset. It is essential to find time for some kind of self-care. If you know what you love most, what soothes you best, be sure to fit some of it in. If you don't know, try some things out, and find some tools that bring respite and ease. Too often we think that we have no time to spare, but it is as important for us to take care of ourselves as it is for our children to see us doing so. I know it is trite, but there is solid logic behind the notion of putting your own oxygen mask on before you can help others. Parenting has transformed into an ever-vigilant job, and in order to keep up with all that is happening in the world and in our homes without breaking down, we must find ways to manage stress and maintain our emotional resilience. Taking care of our own well-being can prevent us from becoming overly reactive or taking our child's behavior personally. It also models for them to do the same.

QTIP CAUTIOUS CONSIDERATIONS



There are some cautionary tales of QTIP that can be challenging to recognize as we work diligently to improve our ability to stay emotionally unattached to what someone else says, does, or believes.

Caution #1: Actually Doing It

While we may be able to “see” that not taking something personally would benefit us and offer language (in our own mind and out loud), the slippery slope is managing our emotional response. Knowing what would be best in the situation for our own sanity and peace of mind does not always translate to doing what will bring ease and comfort as the situation ends. It is important to translate understanding into action. This is where flexing must be practiced because, like every muscle in our body, simply thinking we want to be stronger does not alleviate atrophy.

Educator

A student refuses to do any homework, rarely passes tests, and is in danger of failing your class. You have offered to meet them at lunch or after school, to help them get on track. You have called home to discuss your concerns for this student, and you have spoken to administration and counseling about your concerns. You are at your wit’s end. However, you can flex your QTIP SEL Muscle and see that this is not about you. There must be more to this student’s story than you know. You have the tools, awareness, and language to apply QTIP. You’ve got this!

And then, you bark at the student, or you give the student the cold shoulder, finding yourself feeling frustrated more than caring. You might not even notice that the student is costing you a subtle (or not so subtle) price for not engaging more with their own outcomes, after all you have done for them. You seem to care for them more than they care about themselves, and this can be discouraging and exhausting. Your own emotional health is taxed,

and while you might justify your mood, it is simply impossible to be proud of it.

Now, you might become frustrated at the QTIP SEL Muscle because it is not working—you are still not at peace even though you want to be. In that awareness you have the opportunity to give yourself grace, acknowledge that this is a long game of SEL Muscle strengthening, and recognize that the workout is worth it, no matter how long it takes to build the SEL Muscle. Why? Because you and your peace of mind are *worth* it. Because when you go home feeling solid rather than taken out, your evening (and those you share it with) will get the best of who you are rather than the frustrated and depleted version of yourself.

Perhaps one of the hardest things to do in approaching QTIP is to allow yourself room to be wrong, or room for growth. When we are 100% committed to being right, looking good, or the consistent notion that “I got this,” there is no room for not taking it personally. QTIP inherently requires us to see outside of ourselves and offer benefit of the doubt to the other person.



IDEAS

- When a student demonstrates not caring, a QTIP response might sound like “I hear you, and no problem—I can care enough for us both until you are able to meet me.”
- When a colleague tells you what “should” work with a student, or how they “don’t have that problem” (aka, they “do it better than you”), a QTIP response might sound like “That is awesome—maybe I could observe you sometime?” or “I wonder if you could share a couple of your success stories with me.”

These responses are apt to diffuse any developing struggles because you let go of the full control of the situation while still maintaining your integrity, strength, and well-being.

Parent/Carer

You are knee deep and exhausted as you move through responsibilities at home, at work, for children, for your significant other, for extended family, for your community, for your friends, and so on. You feel like you have it together, until you don't. You need support, and you ask your child to do an age-appropriate thing: pick up a few toys, empty a dishwasher, put away clean clothes, start a meal, carry in items you shopped for . . . The list is long because the tasks are many. You believe that your request is simple, until you are ignored or argued with or the negotiations begin.

Knowing they are young, you feel like you can give them the benefit of the doubt and flex your QTIP SEL Muscle. You think you aren't taking their pushback personally, as you stay cool and try again, and again, and again. At some point the "and again" drives you over the edge, and the result is not something you feel good about. For example, you do the task yourself, you engage in a power struggle, or you get them to do it but everyone is mad, and the house is in chaos. *And*, you feel terrible inside, defeated, unsupported, devalued, ineffective, and maybe even unloved.

All this is going on inside you while you're also experiencing the guilt of "losing it" or frustration over "giving in." In those moments it is easy to forget your QTIP SEL Muscle (this isn't about me; it is about them). Any unfavorable reaction by us toward them demonstrates our attachment to their actions over our own calm and ease. We often attach the following ideas to our kids, and when they don't meet the expectation, we take it personally even though we have set them up for the exact response we are upset by. This can be hard to recognize and an "ouch" to wrap our head around.

IDEAS

- **"I do so much for you, so the least you can do is . . ."** Even if these specific words are not spoken, this mindset takes their action/inaction very personally and requires a young person to "pay you back" for being their parent/carers. This

continued

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will not create a long-term healthy outcome for either party. A statement that may address the situation without personalizing it may be “I hear that you aren’t interested in taking out the trash, and I never am either. That said, I need help. Without help I am grouchy and exhausted. This is bad for us all.” Sharing with your child what you need (more on this in other SEL Muscles) and making sure the task is identified as *not* an option are clear ways to communicate what you need from them. Even if they do not respond in a way you want, you can feel good about your approach.

- **“Would you take out the garbage?”** This question leaves room for a person to simply refuse. We think we have been polite and they “should” want to do what we ask because we said please. When they don’t do what we “asked,” we take it personally, even going so far at times to associate their noncompliance with personalizations such as “They don’t love me,” “They don’t care about me,” or “Can’t they just see I need help?”

All of this creates reactions that are often void of positive outcomes because we have identified their actions as the reason for our upset. When we recognize this, we can become better at flexing our QTIP SEL Muscles and replace challenging interactions with calm ones. This does not mean you get your way every time, but it does mean you feel good about yourself and your effort to create environments that you feel positive in.

Caution #2: What We Need to Hear

This one can be a bit of an “ouch” because not many of us love it when we need to hear and embrace things that identify our areas of growth. Take a deep breath and allow yourself to really let this sink in.

There are times when what others are telling us—maybe our student, our boss, our partner, our best friend, our child, or a parent—will actually help us improve. We can become more creative educators, better friends, more competent workers, more collaborative team players, more compassionate listeners, calmer parents . . . You get the idea. None of us live in a vacuum, and all of us have room to develop. When we are receiving feedback, it is important to be able to distinguish between what is ours to receive and what is about others.

For instance, your colleague is feeling frustrated because you were late to a meeting for the third time. The colleague is

speaking with irritation when addressing you. You determine that the irritation is on the other person; however, you are the one experiencing upset, and therefore the solution can be found in your actions. It would be supportive of the relationship to acknowledge that you were late and that you realize this created an inconvenience for the colleague. Often, however, an irritated person is met with an irritated reaction, and this simply escalates the situation, and resolution is missed all together.

Another example might be with a teenager at home or in class. An assignment is given that the teenager doesn't understand the reasoning behind. They get edgy (that may be a kind word for how they act) and escalate to a state of refusal. As an educator or a parent, it might be helpful for us to offer reasoning to some requests. However, sometimes we ourselves escalate to an immediate power struggle. As adults, we feel that we should be respectfully listened to. The longer we personalize rather than get on board with today's youth and how to reach them, the more frustrated and ineffective we will be. Frustrated and ineffective is a perfect combination to create stress and unhappiness. Leaning into learning about others and being curious about what they might be contributing to us will lead to less personalization and deeper, more meaningful relationships—including the one we have with ourselves.

QTIP Review

THE BASICS

- QTIP stands for “Quit Taking It Personally.”
- QTIP is a mental strategy to avoid personalizing negative interactions.
- Others’ actions reflect their needs and lived experiences, not your worth.

WHY BOTHER?

- QTIP helps maintain emotional stability and mental health.
- QTIP allows for more empathetic and effective responses.
- QTIP prevents burnout and resentment in both familial and educational settings.

SECRET SAUCE

- Reframe negative interactions from “They did this to me” to “This is about their needs.”
- Give the benefit of the doubt to others: “There is something I do not know.”
- Separate “personal feelings” from “what is happening.”

AWESOME OUTCOMES

- Develop emotional resilience in challenging situations and interactions.
- Preserve mental health and reinvigorate joy in our roles with young people.
- Create more positive and productive atmospheres at home, in classrooms, and in communities.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- **Reframe negative interactions:** Shift your perspective by recognizing that others’ behaviors reflect their own needs, challenges, or emotions rather than being a direct attack on you. This mindset helps preserve emotional stability and allows for more empathetic and confident responses.
- **Set boundaries while staying objective:** Establish clear boundaries to address inappropriate behaviors without personalizing them. Focus on maintaining objectivity and holding others accountable in a constructive way, which can reduce stress and improve relationships.

- **Practice self-care and emotional resilience:** Regularly engage in self-care to maintain your emotional well-being, enabling you to respond calmly and confidently in challenging situations. This not only protects your mental health but also models emotional regulation for others, such as children or students.



QTIP Pause and Reflect

NOTICE.

- In what areas of life do you take things personally? Who or what feels the most personal?
- When you feel personally affronted, what feelings do you experience? What behaviors, words, or attitudes follow these feelings?
- Who is most affected by these behaviors? What does it cost you and those you care about? What does it cost you as you move through your day, regardless of who you are around?

CHOOSE.

- Considering what you notice, what outcomes would you prefer instead?
- What can you see about yourself and your relationships if you could step back from personalizing and step into offering grace to yourself and others?
- How would you be feeling, and what behaviors, words, and actions would you experience in yourself? Who would benefit from this new approach?

ACT.

- What mindset, words, or actions will you apply to reduce personalizing what others present? Be specific and realistic.
- Maybe consider these starters:
 - As I notice myself feeling triggered, I will immediately . . .
 - When I step back from my reaction to others, I am able to . . .
 - After I get triggered and I notice this happened, I will . . .

Consider possible obstacles to these actions and prethink a plan to overcome them.

Remember to give yourself room to get it right and miss it fully—it's the practice that moves us forward.

