

Inspiration from abroad

Teaching everyday life skills and self-care for children and adolescents

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Should everyday life skills and self-care be taught in school and if so, how? In this article, self-care and everyday life skills are discussed as they appear in the Finnish core curriculum for basic education. Examples and how to teach self-care and everyday life skills are also introduced.

Everyday life skills and self-care are skills that are built up from different social, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Everyday life skills, including self-awareness, emotional skills and recognizing one's strengths, support and benefit individuals throughout their lives (FNBE, 2016). These lifelong skills form one part of the so-called transversal skills in the Finnish core curriculum. Compared to subject-based competences, transversal skills are more general and broadly integrated into the curriculum. Everyday life skills and self-care, for example, are closely linked to health and physical education throughout basic education.

Assessment of subject-specific skills is often more familiar to teachers compared to softer skills, such as emotional skills or knowledge and skills in making practical sustainable choices. It might also be difficult to assess, for example, if one's self-esteem or time management developed from grade eight to nine, or improved from last year. Nevertheless, if the development of everyday skills and self-care is important for the future of children and young people, and as a prerequisite for living healthy and productive lives, it is desirable for everyday life skills and self-care to be taught as part of the curriculum. Basic education can be a starting point for these important life skills, especially for children who do not get enough support at home.

Self-care and everyday life skills all along the educational path

In the Finnish core curriculum for basic education, self-care and everyday life skills form one part of the transversal skills, which aim to encourage pupils to recognize their own qualities, strengths, and potential, and to value themselves (FNBE, 2016). These skills are cross-curricular and include skills related to safety, technology, and sustainable living. Pupils are also guided toward developing their own consumer skills. The purpose is to guide pupils toward trusting in the future and teach them how to take care of themselves and others. Although generic skills support individuals at all stages of the life cycle, the need for self-care and certain life skills is different, and varies at different stages along the educational path.

Starting school brings a new level of responsibility and independence for a child. It is a time for a broad range of new and very basic self-care and life skills, such as common rules and good manners, as well as the ability to express and name emotions. In the upper grades, there is also an emphasis on teamwork. An emphasis is also placed on learning to protect one's privacy and personal boundaries. Overall, students are encouraged to reflect on their choices in a wide range of ways, in order to make their future more sustainable. In secondary school, students will continue to practice sustainable choices and practices in different areas of life. For example, pupils will be guided to identify different aspects that promote well-being and will learn to regulate their emotions. They are also encouraged to act safely on the roads and to be responsible consumers (FNBE, 2016).

Teaching and assessing self-care and everyday life skills

Learning self-care and everyday life skills requires individuals to develop their self-awareness, recognize their own strengths, and be aware of their patterns of thinking and be able to change them.

One example that contributes to children's and young people's well-being is the development of their own time-management skills. Time management is a tool that enhances learning and well-being and helps individuals to achieve key goals. At its simplest, it is about self-awareness, organizing one's time and establishing routines. It requires planning and setting goals, commitment, prioritization, and stress management. Pupils can, for example, learn how and why to limit the use of electronic devices, in order to have enough time for important tasks, as well as for leisure and recovery. Managing one's own time gives one the space to be creative and proactive about one's own goals, whether they be learning goals or leisure goals. Everyday life skills, such as time management, is not an easily measurable issue, but is closely linked to many other skills and domains of transversal competences, such as learning to learn, and skills required later in working life.

Another example for teaching everyday life skills could be to guide learners to think about what is natural for them. For example, in the case of time-management skills, the learner could be guided to reflect on their own daily rhythm. Mood and alertness vary throughout the day: some feel most alert in the early afternoon, while others are most alert in the late afternoon, and most fall somewhere in between (Roenneberg et al., 2003). Hence, more attention could be placed on supporting and raising awareness about one's own circadian preference and rhythm. In early adolescence, bedtime is delayed, and sleep length gradually decreases from early to late adolescence (Randler, 2011). Previous studies show that an adolescent's circadian preference for eveningness is related to impaired daytime functioning (Wolfson & Carskadon, 1998) and increased internalized problems, e.g. anxiety (Quach et al., 2018). For learning and alertness, sleep and recovery play a critical role. There are ways to encourage learners to enhance their learning and recovery: study during the day, review key points just before falling asleep, but get a good night's sleep.

Recovery as an example of one's time management

Many young people find it difficult to concentrate in the first hours of the school day. To account for this, schools could better support different circadian preferences. Given the development of sleep and circadian rhythms during adolescence, this would mean later school mornings. Later school start times have been introduced in some schools in Helsinki. Another way of supporting different rhythms could be to give students the choice of attending classes early in the morning or later in the afternoon. In light of research findings, this could have a positive impact on school performance. For their part, families can pay more attention to good sleep hygiene by sticking to roughly the same bedtime and wake-up time, encouraging exercise and outdoor activities during the day (not too late at night), and using different blue light filters on screens in the evening. These things help to maintain one's circadian rhythm. Finding a similar schedule for screen time and sleep for the whole family can be challenging. It is also good to remember that young people's sleep needs are individual.

In this article, I have discussed time management and recovery as examples of everyday life skills and self-care, why these skills are important, and how these skills could be taught in school. The Finnish core curriculum for basic education takes everyday life skills and self-care into account, and enhances the well-being and sustainable future of children and adolescents, together with families and the whole society. This can serve as an example for developing a more sustainable school system, one which enhances students' well-being now and in the future.

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