



Social-Emotional Learning through Chess

Presenter: David Heiser, Renaissance Knights Chess Foundation

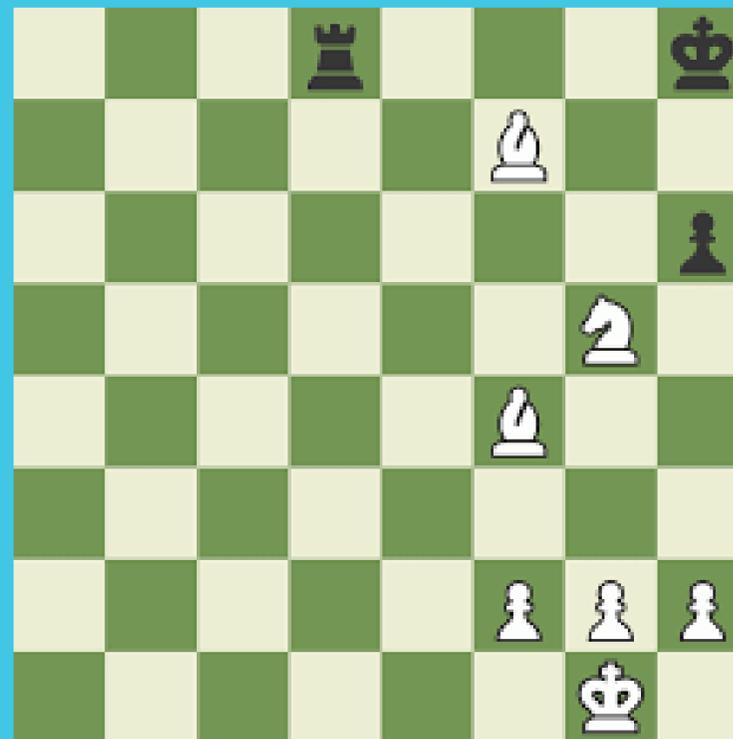
Opening Activity



Let's start with something simple to get our minds in motion



Here's a quick chess puzzle – one move to checkmate. Take a few seconds to think about it.



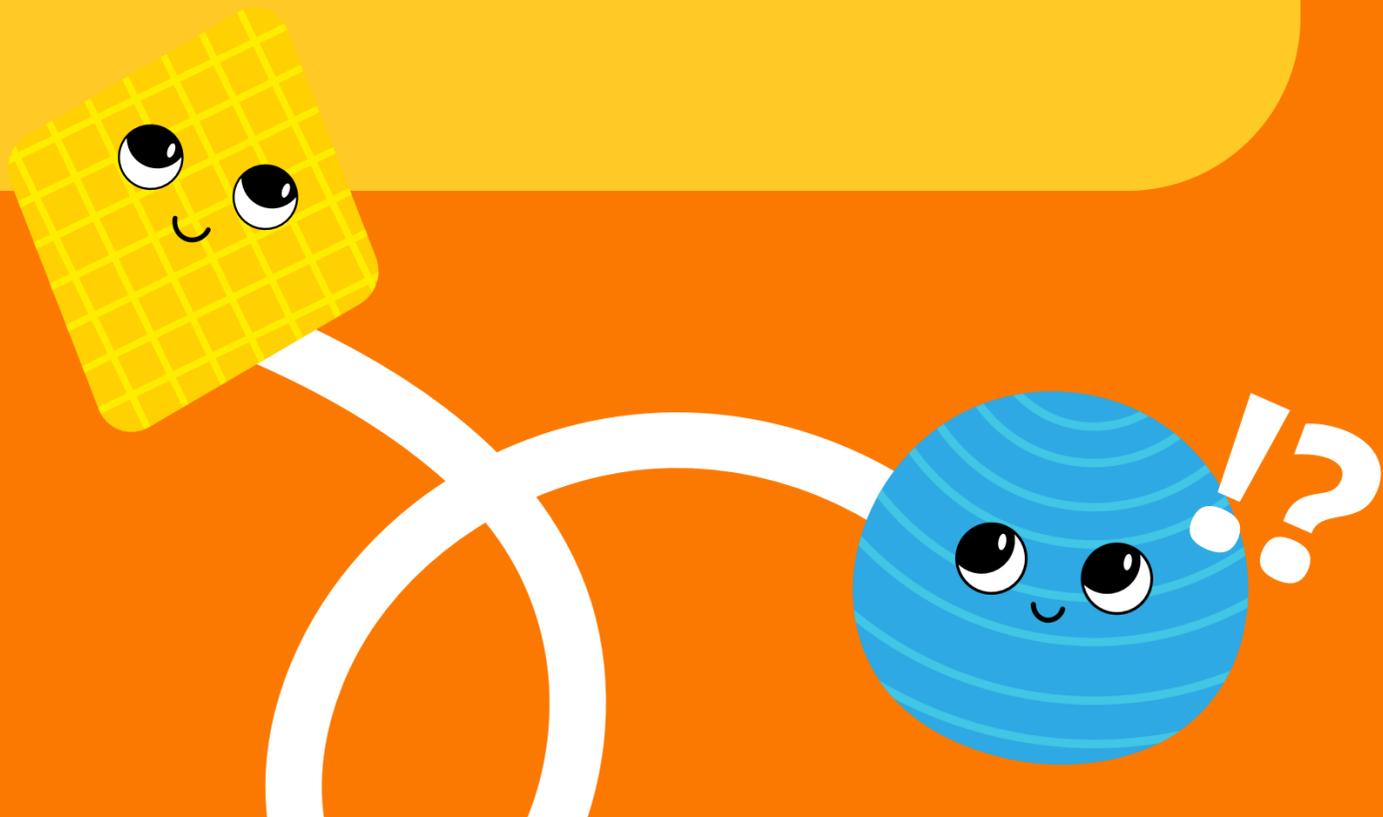
Great! Now – how did that feel? Did you feel confident, uncertain, excited, or maybe a little pressured?

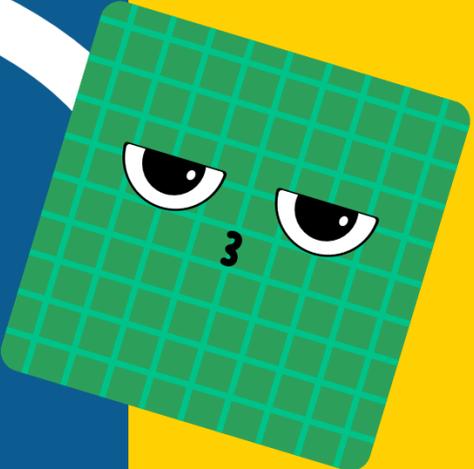


That quick moment captures what Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is all about. Recognizing emotions, managing responses, and making thoughtful decisions – just like in a game of chess.

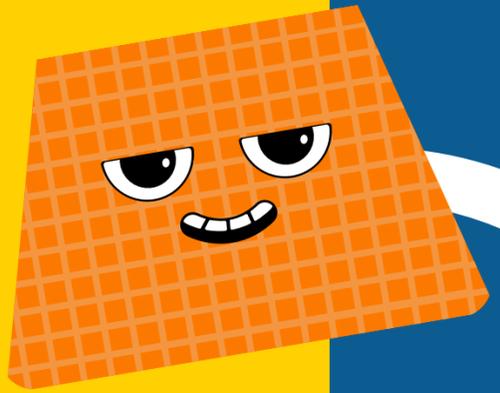


Today, we'll explore how chess isn't just a game – it's a framework for developing lifelong SEL skills.





Chess teaches us far more than how to move pieces on a board. It's a mirror of life decisions and emotions.



Cognitive Benefits:

Every move requires focus, planning, and problem-solving. Students learn patience and persistence as they anticipate outcomes.

Emotional Benefits:

Chess is full of wins and losses – and that's powerful. Students experience frustration, pride, disappointment, and joy – all within a safe, structured space. Over time, they learn to manage those emotions constructively.

Social Benefits:

In every game, there's respect. A handshake before and after. You win with humility and lose with grace. In team settings, players learn to support one another and celebrate growth.



**We've seen chess transform
thousands of students across CPS.**

Teachers report improved focus, fewer behavioral issues, and stronger peer relationships.

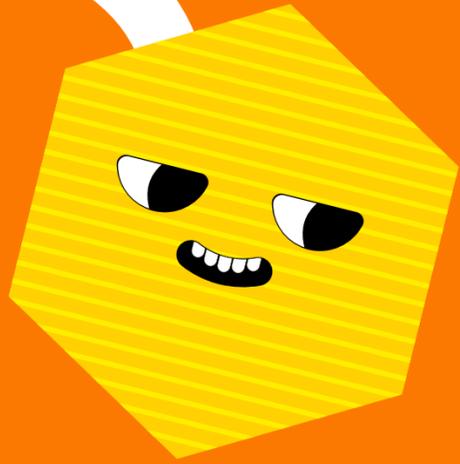
In our Cops & Kids program, officers and students alike report greater trust and empathy.

One parent told us: "My son used to give up easily – now he pauses, thinks, and tries again."

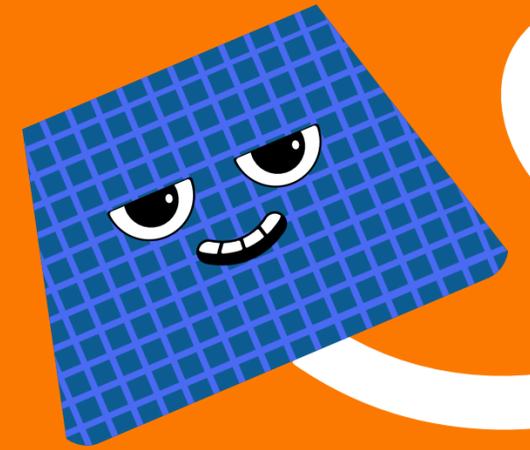


That's the power of SEL through chess.





Connecting Chess to the Five Core SEL Competencies



- **Self-Awareness:** Recognizing emotions (frustration, confidence, hesitation) while making choices.
- **Self-Management:** Controlling impulses to move quickly, staying calm under pressure.
- **Social Awareness:** Understanding teammates' perspectives and respecting diverse strategies.
- **Relationship Skills:** Building consensus, communicating clearly, and listening actively.
- **Responsible Decision-Making:** Weighing consequences and choosing based on reasoning rather than emotion.

Self-Awareness: Reflecting on the Board and Within

Every chess player knows the moment after a mistake – that sinking realization of “Why did I do that?” For students, that reflection is powerful. It teaches them to look inward, recognize emotions, and assess their decision-making. Over time, they become more attuned to their strengths and weaknesses, both on the board and in life.

In classrooms where introduced chess journals where your students write about how they felt during games – frustration, excitement, pride, or disappointment. These reflections open doors to self-awareness discussions rarely sparked by typical lessons.

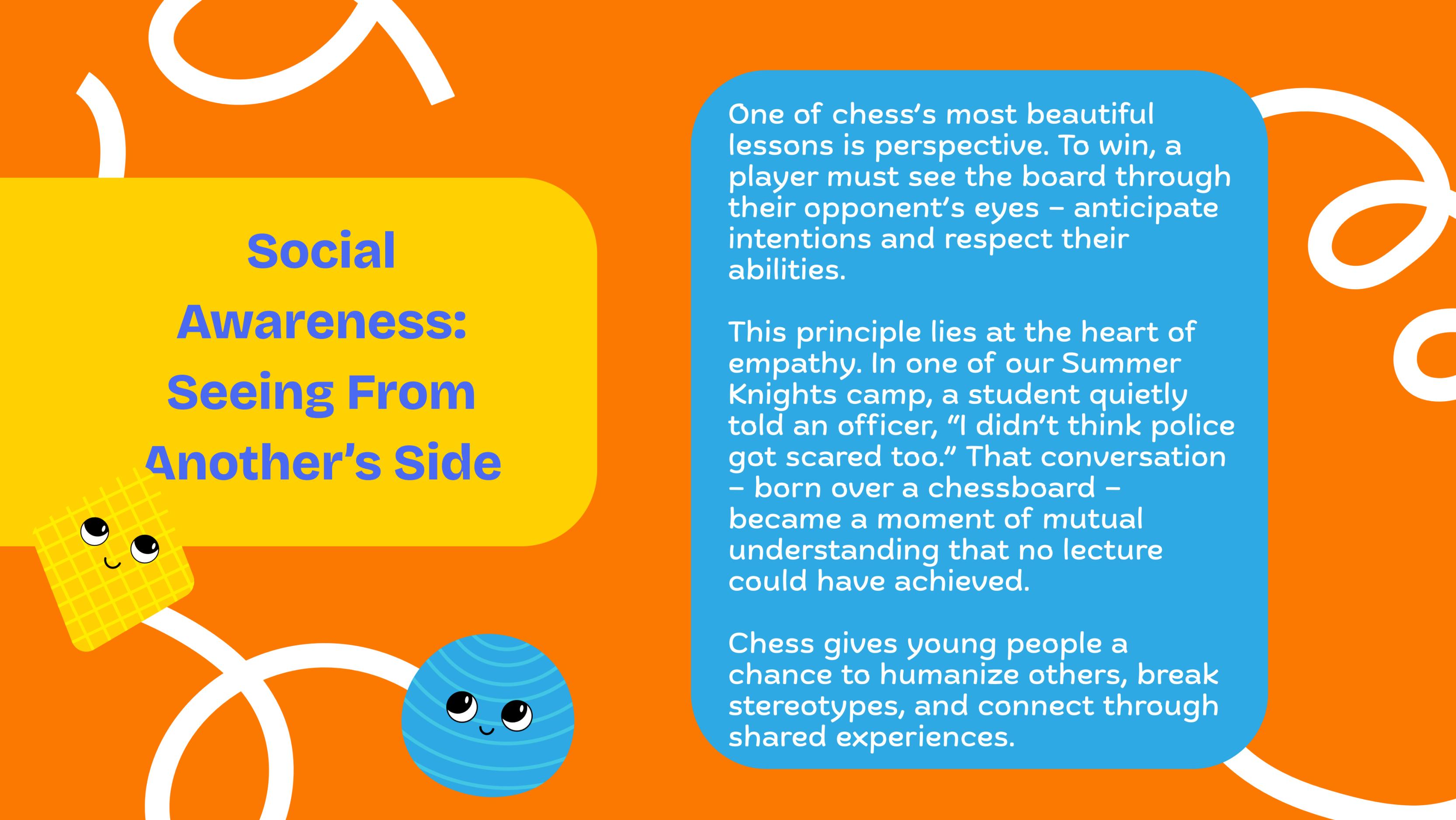


Self- Management: Patience in a Ticking Clock

Chess demands patience. There's a clock ticking, pressure building, and yet – no one wins by rushing. For many children, especially those growing up in high-stress environments, learning to pause before acting is transformative. It cultivates mindfulness and control.

In your programs, remind students: "Breathe before you move." This simple phrase is a metaphor that echoes far beyond the chess class – it helps students navigate frustration, peer conflict, and even academics.





**Social
Awareness:
Seeing From
Another's Side**

One of chess's most beautiful lessons is perspective. To win, a player must see the board through their opponent's eyes – anticipate intentions and respect their abilities.

This principle lies at the heart of empathy. In one of our Summer Knights camp, a student quietly told an officer, "I didn't think police got scared too." That conversation – born over a chessboard – became a moment of mutual understanding that no lecture could have achieved.

Chess gives young people a chance to humanize others, break stereotypes, and connect through shared experiences.

Relationship Skills: From Opponents to Allies

Every chess game begins and ends with a handshake – a universal gesture of respect. Over time, students build meaningful relationships with coaches, peers, and even rivals.

Students learn that success isn't about one player's brilliance, but the collective effort of preparation, encouragement, and shared accountability.

Older students often mentor younger ones, teaching not just chess, but communication, leadership, and compassion – life skills that extend well beyond the tournament hall.





Responsible Decision- Making: Every Move Counts



In chess, impulsive moves have consequences. Students quickly realize that good outcomes come from thoughtful choices and considering multiple perspectives – exactly what SEL aims to develop.

When a player sacrifices a piece for a strategic purpose, they're learning risk assessment. When they accept defeat with dignity, they're learning accountability. Chess constantly reinforces the lesson that our decisions – both on the board and off – shape our outcomes.

Practical Applications of Chess for SEL

In the Classroom:

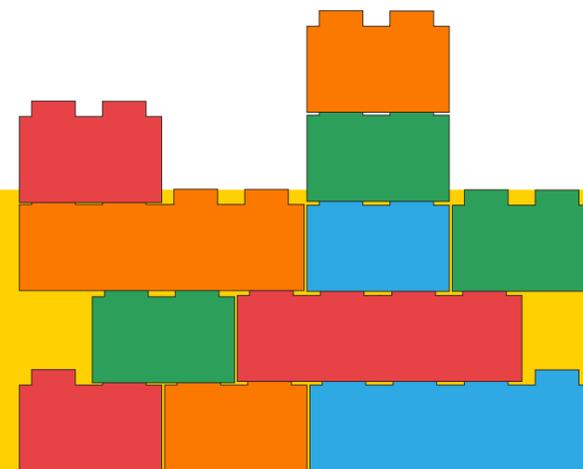
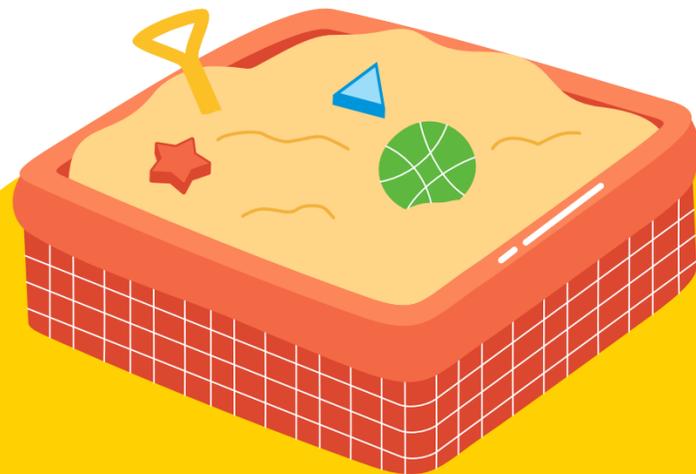
Teachers can use quick puzzles to build focus or patience.

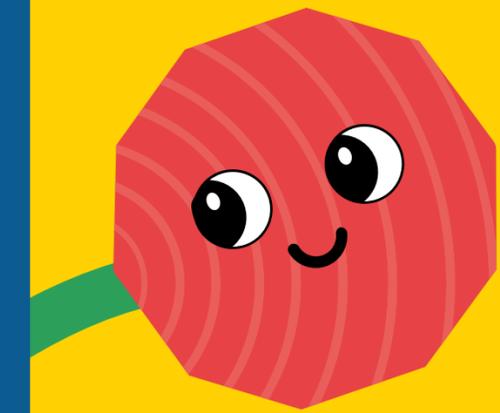
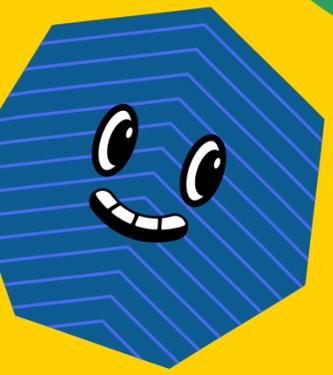
Have students journal after a game – what emotion did they feel and how did they manage it?

After-School Programs:

Older students can mentor younger ones, developing leadership and empathy.

Team tournaments promote collaboration and communication.





Help participants experience how decision-making in chess reflects self-awareness, emotional control, and interpersonal understanding – core SEL competencies.

**Form small groups
3-4 students.**

**Set-up a simple
chess position.**

**Ask each group to
discuss and
decide on one
move to play next.**

After revealing each group's chosen move, guide a brief discussion:

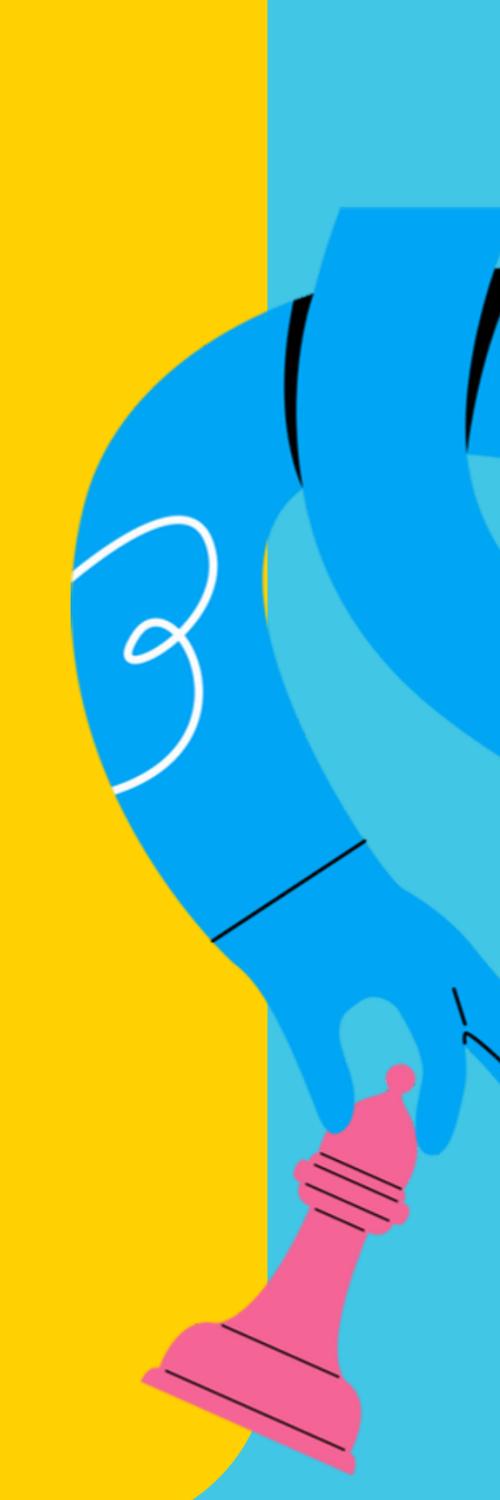
- How did your emotions influence your decision?
- Did your thinking style lean more toward caution or risk-taking?
- How did you manage differences of opinion in your group?
- What parallels do you see between this process and real-life challenges in communication, leadership, or conflict resolution?



“ Start Playing, Keep Learning ”

Wearing a team uniform strengthens SEL outcomes by fostering belonging, discipline, teamwork, and pride – but works best when paired with intentional coaching that models empathy, respect, and sportsmanship.

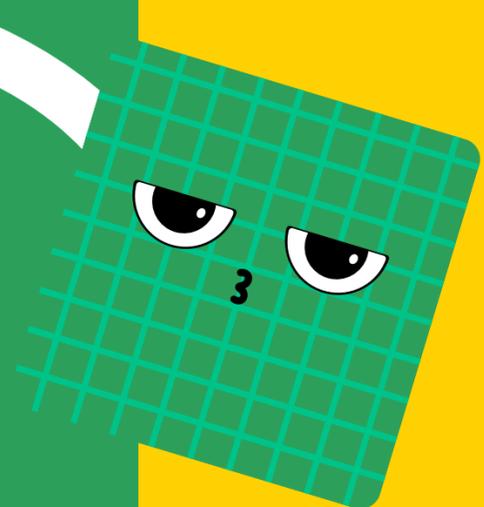




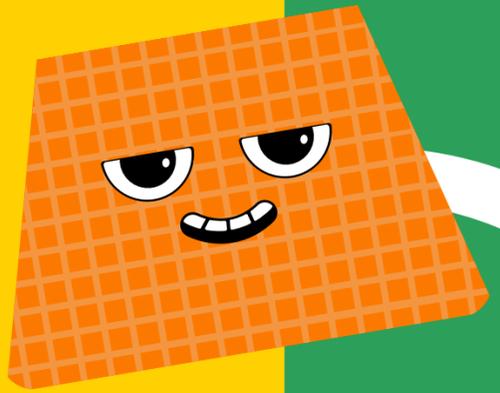
Identity and Belonging

Wearing a uniform strengthens a sense of belonging and team identity, which is a cornerstone of SEL.

- Students feel part of something larger than themselves.
- It reinforces social awareness and relationship skills by creating shared purpose.
- Team colors and logos often serve as symbols of pride and unity, boosting morale and motivation.



Relationship Skills and Cooperation



Uniforms help blur individual differences and emphasize collective effort.

- Players learn to value teamwork over personal recognition – supporting skills like empathy, communication, and cooperation.
- A uniform can act as a visual reminder of shared goals and mutual respect.



Self-Management and Discipline

Wearing a uniform represents commitment and responsibility.

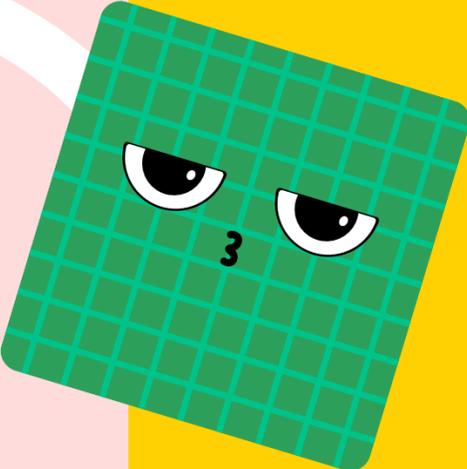
- Athletes associate it with effort, punctuality, and behavioral standards.
- Coaches often use uniform expectations to teach accountability – part of SEL’s self-management and responsible decision-making domains.

Emotional Connection and Pride

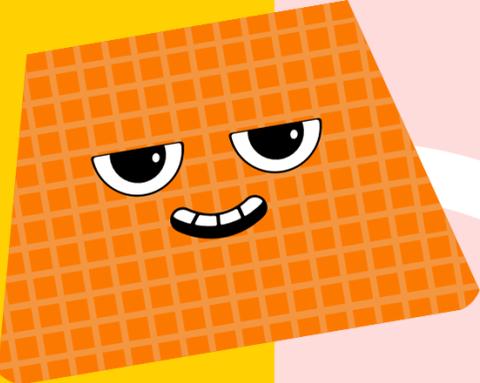
Uniforms can foster emotional regulation and confidence by creating a sense of pride and professionalism.

- Putting on the uniform becomes a ritual that signals readiness to focus, perform, and represent their school positively.
- This contributes to resilience, confidence, and self-respect – key SEL traits.



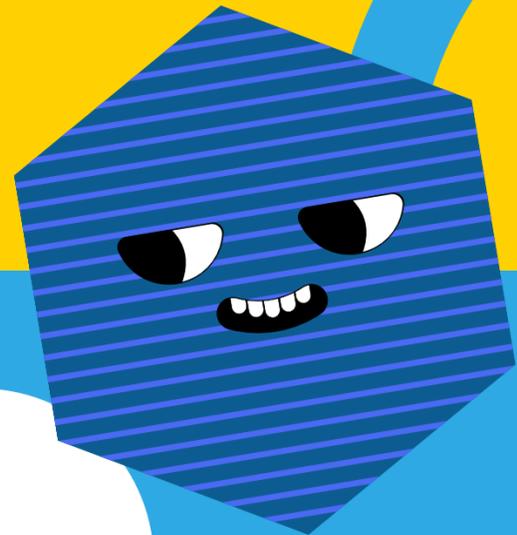


Equity and Inclusion



When everyone wears the same uniform, status differences fade, helping all team members feel valued equally.

- This can be especially important in diverse schools where economic differences might otherwise impact social dynamics.



Thank You!

