



How Learning Happens Messaging Framework

A Tool for Communicating about Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning

New energy, new evidence, and an emerging consensus on how learning happens have created a remarkable opportunity to galvanize widespread adoption of a whole child approach. This approach can benefit each and every child and, when delivered in a way that respects and nurtures young people's individual identities and experiences, can especially benefit young people whose needs and strengths have been neglected by current systems and approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing inequities and has brought even greater attention to the benefits—and the necessity—of whole child approaches to learning. The youth-supporting field must capitalize on this moment to build a stronger and clearer narrative about how learning happens and the importance of intentional, whole child approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive development.

ABOUT THIS MESSAGING

This messaging framework is based on three foundational beliefs:

1. Persistent inequities, along with a deeper understanding of how learning happens, have created the need to articulate a stronger and clearer narrative to better mobilize and galvanize the field.
2. Messages about how learning happens are often obscured by confusion over terminology, weakening the field's overall ability to tell a compelling story about social, emotional, and cognitive development.
3. Using consistent messages—in frame, words, and tone—can help us more effectively advocate for necessary changes in systems and practices so that each and every child can reach their full potential as learners and as human beings.

The purpose and contribution of this document is to provide a shared messaging framework as a starting point for communicating about how learning happens. Our view is that a strong, coherent narrative can help the youth-supporting field come together, align our work toward a common purpose, and move toward the day when a whole child mindset is a well-accepted, widely-adopted model of approaching all work with children and youth.

We recognize and expect that our partners and colleagues will continue to rely on their own angles of emphasis and language—whether it be social and emotional learning, trauma-informed care, whole child approaches, or others—in pursuing their respective agendas. We do not seek to replace that language and have worked collaboratively to design this messaging framework to be elastic and inclusive enough to serve as a 'big tent' in which all who agree on fundamentals can find a home. We are eager to hear feedback and ongoing input on how the language and messages are being used and received so that this framework can become a living document that is strengthened and refined over time.

THE CORE MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

WHAT WE KNOW

New, groundbreaking research and science—confirmed by the experience of young people and the youth-supporting adults who work with them—mean we know more than ever about how young people learn and grow. We know that:

LEARNING IS MULTIDIMENSIONAL

- Learning is social; the quality of our relationships and social interactions shape our ability to learn.
- Emotions are essential to learning; they help us connect to what we are learning and make meaning. Feeling safe and respected enhances our ability to learn.
- Learning is cognitive; the ability to think, reason, and solve problems deepens our understanding.
- When the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning work together, young people are more likely to achieve academic success and enhance life skills such as teamwork and empathy, which help them thrive inside and outside of the classroom.

LEARNING IS CONTEXTUAL

- Learning happens all the time and everywhere, not just in school.
- Brains develop throughout our lives; intense periods of growth happen in early childhood and adolescence, and are affected by the quality of one's environment, resources, and relationships.
- Racial, cultural, and individual identities play an important role in social, emotional, and cognitive development.
- Discrimination and oppression affect young people's well-being and can interfere with healthy development and learning.

LEARNING IS RELATIONAL

- Relationships play a central role in a child's development; having a web of sustained and supportive human connections is crucial to every young person's well-being, learning, and sense of belonging.
- Adults in school and community settings play a key role in helping young people learn and grow across social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions; properly empowering them is essential.
- Adults' implicit and explicit beliefs about and reactions to discrimination and oppression affect their interactions with young people; they have the opportunity to challenge long-held mindsets and approaches and enable healthy, supported development.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Individual Identities and Experiences

Throughout this document we refer to Individual identities and experiences as important components of learning and development. These identities and experiences include but are not limited to: race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, language spoken at home, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, housing status, or involvement in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems.

Academic vs. Cognitive

We grappled with which of these two terms to use in this messaging. "Academic" signifies the connection that the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning have with academic achievement and success. "Cognitive" could be interpreted as a more natural and broader counterpart to the social and emotional dimensions of learning but calling it out separately could inadvertently suggest that cognition isn't a part of social and emotional development. Ultimately, we opted to primarily use cognitive in these messages, in part because it more accurately conveys all the places young people learn and develop. We invite you to use the word that works best for your audiences and context.

Child vs. Young Person

We use "child" and "young person" interchangeably throughout this document, as these messages span the K-12 age range. Although the term "child" can be used to describe any person under the age of 19, it is commonly used to refer to the younger portion of that age bracket. Conversely, "young person" is most commonly used to refer to youth over 10 years of age. Although nuanced developmental processes occur at different ages, learning is a social, emotional, and cognitive endeavor at any age.

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION: HOW LEARNING HAPPENS

This knowledge about how learning happens, including insights from research with young people who have experienced learning settings that prioritize social, emotional, and cognitive development, must drive and direct our actions going forward. That means creating positive learning environments and experiences that encompass the following elements:

MEANINGFUL LEARNING: Every child is engaged in meaningful learning that is relevant to them.

- "Having the opportunity to learn about something that you're passionate about in school can make people more willing to learn, and like you want to put more effort in." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Report](#)
- "This project gave me an opportunity to, within school, study something that I had been thinking a lot about ... that made me more motivated to do research and to create a presentation about this kind of thing." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Report](#)

INTENTIONALITY: Every child has intentional opportunities to practice and build social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

- "I feel like other schools give you the background to prepare you for college itself. But this school is already like college ... You're already prepared to go out into the real world." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Report](#)
- "Our teachers tell us about it, it's not just 'Oh yeah we're doing this.' They tell us why we're doing this, what it means, things like that." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Report](#)

BELONGING: Every child feels safe, respected, supported, and a true sense of belonging.

- "We had meetings every Friday [during COVID] to check in on each other. Having this bond and a sense of belonging encourages us to continue moving on and pushing each other to keep each other motivated." –Jazmin M., Youth Panelist, [How Learning Happens Now](#)
- "Whenever I walk in here, the environment is always just so welcoming. I feel very comfortable here, like it's a second home to me." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Mini-Documentary](#)

IDENTITY: Every child can see themselves reflected in teachers, leaders, curriculum, and learning materials.

- "Teach all students' history – more than just [Black history] month. It should be deeper and more ongoing." –Youth Panelist, [Growing the Whole Child Movement: A Year After A Nation at Hope](#)
- "I feel like there was a mutual understanding immediately upon arriving at school ... we can build a connection based on our shared deaf experience." –Emily N., Youth Panelist, [Growing the Whole Child Movement: A Year After A Nation at Hope](#)
- "Some of [the teachers'] problems are exactly like ours, their life experiences. And we just feel connected to them, like, 'You know what, I'm going to go talk to this teacher.'" –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Report](#)

RELATIONSHIPS: Every child has strong, trusting relationships with adults and peers.

- "It's not always about school. It gets really intimate, you know? ... Our mentor program does a really good job, and I think that's what our school's known for. It gives that relationship, and I've always admired that." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Mini-Documentary](#)
- "You're with your friends and you're excited about learning because you're in an environment that makes you happy ... the relationships just make you want to learn more." –Youth Research Participant, [All of Who I Am Mini-Documentary](#)

AGENCY: Every child has the opportunity and authority to drive and shape their own learning.

- "A decision that a principal usually makes on his or her own is made together. As students, we can go to the student body and see how they feel about something. It's been good to have a seat at the table." –Don B., Youth Panelist, [How Learning Happens Now](#)
- "The school does a good job of not just including the faculty but including the students as well. They're not just talking about what staff and teachers want, I truly believe they want what students want." –Patton B., Youth Panelist, [How Learning Happens Now](#)
- "When you show the students that you're actually taking the advice and letting them lead the way, it's very empowering." –Fathia Q., Youth Panelist, [Growing the Whole Child Movement: A Year After A Nation at Hope](#)

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

Ultimately, our language should be clear, asset-based, and reflective of the reality of how learning happens. The examples below are suggestions for ways to shift the narrative in favor of a more youth-centered, evidence-informed framing learning and development:

From separating academic learning from social and emotional development *to* emphasizing the interconnectedness of social, emotional, and academic development.

From “fixing” young people *to* improving learning environments.

From doing things *for* young people *to* partnering *with* young people as collaborative decision-makers.

From a “regardless of race/income/etc.” narrative that lacks nuance and specificity *to* a narrative that is acutely responsive to young people’s identities and experiences.

From norms based around a white-dominant model *to* an approach rooted in the strengths and diversity of each and every young person and community.

From thinking that learning only happens in schools *to* knowing that learning happens everywhere and all the time.

From thinking that relationships are a “nice to have” *to* recognizing that relationships are a “must have” for the growth of young people.

From assuming that adults know it all *to* realizing that adults are working on their own social, emotional, and cognitive development and need the preparation, support, and working conditions to create the environments where learning happens.

From believing that our talent and potential are fixed *to* knowing that our experiences, relationships, environments, and agency drive how we learn and who we become.

Together, we can create environments and experiences that put every child in the best possible position to build and practice the knowledge and life skills they need to thrive.

HOW THIS MESSAGING WAS DEVELOPED

The messaging builds on the How Learning Happens frame developed by The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. It also incorporates key findings from youth-centered research by the Center for Promise at America’s Promise Alliance, including the All of Who I Am report.

We’d like to acknowledge our partners who participated in interviews to inform the development of this messaging and who reviewed different versions of the drafts: Karen Niemi from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); Karen Pittman and Priscilla Little from The Forum for Youth Investment; Linda Darling-Hammond and Jennifer DePaoli from The Learning Policy Institute as well as members of LPI’s Whole Child Policy Table; Hal Smith from The National Urban League; and Dr. Pam Cantor from Turnaround for Children. We’d also like to thank The Education Trust for informing this framework, as well as messaging experts Rachel Bellow from Mind+Matter Studio, Sam Chaltain from 180 Studio, and Nat Kendall-Taylor from Frameworks Institute.