



S.P.A.R.K.

Supporting positive attitudes, resilience, and knowledge

August 2023



A note from Mr. Whipple

SPARK is a wonderful opportunity for our students to get direct instruction, participate in activities, and engage in conversations that help them grow. Specifically, we have identified three key categories for growth and development that we feel are vital to the success of the individual and to the greater school community. By addressing digital citizenship, executive functioning skills, and social-emotional needs, we believe the students will learn to better navigate school, build deeper relationships, and develop resilience in all aspects of life.

Our partnership with The Social Institute has provided us with an abundance of useful material for student engagement, but some of their most impressive content can be accessed via the [Parent Toolkit](#). You can read a little more about The Social Institute on the next page of this newsletter. I hope you will take the time to explore the site and learn more about the things your students are engaging with in the digital world. When prompted, our code is: 27dc696725AD56

Digital Citizenship with Dr. Eicher

In **8th grade**, we explored the challenging question of how to balance our "live" time and our "tech" time. We all struggle with knowing when to put our phone away, how to ask someone if they would put their phone away, and finding time when we are in a group "live"--totally tech free. We asked the 8th graders to team up to pitch "Shark-Tank" style ideas for how to remind ourselves to stay in control of our time on devices. Let's just say the 8th grade is ready for prime time! They had some awesome ideas that ranged from "Inspire" that sends you rewards for less time on your phone to "The Hammer" that gives you a dose of cholesterol for every minute you are on your phone past your allowed time...the children are our future? Anyway, they really engaged, and we encourage you to continue engaging at home on the topic of balancing time on and off tech. Let them know how you do it. Brainstorm ideas together. Discuss why balance is important--what we gain when we are not focused on just a roughly 3 inch by 6 inch screen worldview. Just having the conversations at home can really plant seeds that will help us all.

In **7th grade**, we explored the tricky question of when to text and when to talk. We all struggle with knowing when it's best to resolve an issue by texting and when it's best to use our voice. We asked the 7th grade to debate both sides, allowing them to think about the pros & cons of both approaches. Let's just say we have some great critical thinking going on in 7th grade! They were surprisingly nuanced about taking into account body language, tone of voice, awkwardness, giving people space and grace. We were so impressed with the level of their thinking an empathy...especially last hour on a Friday afternoon! We encourage you to continue engaging at home on the topic of considering the value of talking vs. texting. Let them know how you view the issue. Offer them examples from your experience so they see adults critically consider the issue. Discuss why taking some time to consider talk vs. text is worth it in our relationships. Continued conversations at home allow students to better and more fully understand and engage with this topic.

In **6th grade**, we considered the challenging question of how to ask someone to put down their phone while they are with us. The 6th graders had mini-group discussions about how and when to ask someone to put their device away--and how to do it respectfully. They also decided on 5 adjectives to describe how they feel when an adult or peer is texting or scrolling rather than paying attention to them: frustrated, depressed, annoyed, ignored, and disrespected. Perhaps equally interesting is how the 6th grade described feeling when someone puts down their device without being prompted/asked: loved, valued, respected, heard...and surprised. That last one perhaps suggests how normal it has become in our world for us to choose our device over a live human in our midst. One way you could explore this question at home is to talk about how to ask each other, respectfully, to put away devices during meals and family time. Would it be helpful to have a catch phrase? A code word that everyone understands as a signal? Also, it could be incredibly helpful to share with your kids how you handle asking another adult to put their device away. This lets them know adults deal with the same situations, and it might give them a useful script to use with peers. Thank you!

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING WITH MS. BAKER POWERS

For their first executive functioning lesson, the students learned a bit of brain science to help them understand exactly what we mean by "executive functions." We discussed that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls working memory, inhibitory control and flexible thinking, is the last part of the brain to develop. These three brain processes are essential for the skills of planning, prioritizing, time management, organization, focus and self-awareness. In our first class, we discussed the practical application of these tasks by introducing a system for planning and keeping track of assignments. Note: Any middle school student who can demonstrate that they have a functional planner on Fridays will receive a piece of candy as incentive. We also touched on the importance of organization (think lockers and backpacks) and the value of prioritizing some things over others. Sometimes this is choosing homework rather than a preferred activity or using study hall time wisely.

After discussion of these skills, and a reminder to be patient with themselves as they learn how, I asked your student to spend some time reflecting on which EF skills come more easily for them. I also asked them to think about areas where they need help or have room for improvement. Since having achievable goals is essential to growth and progress, I also asked them to write down a few EF tasks that they will strive to get better at this year. We will revisit their thoughts at the end of the semester.

The beginning of the school year is a great time to put supportive structures in place at home as well. I encourage you to ask to see your student's planner regularly and perhaps institute family meetings where everyone brings a planner and discusses the commitments of the entire family for the week. In this way, parents can model their own organizational strategies and encourage a level of accountability in their children.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL & ETHICAL LEARNING WITH KALLI

The first thing we worked on was defining mindfulness, landing on the working definition of "paying attention to what is happening in the present moment on purpose and with kindness and curiosity." We discussed how, often, what gets you upset are thoughts related to past hurts or unknown future events, but when your mind is resting in the present moment, you will notice you feel calm and in control.

We then went on to discuss when and how to utilize self-awareness and grounding skills, both formally and informally. Most often when we are in a stressful situation it's because our minds are great time-travelers, planning for the weekend or replaying an embarrassing experience. The body, on the other hand, is only ever in one place. So, we use our body as an anchor to bring our mind into the present moment. Some examples we talked about are guided imagery, mindful coloring, deep breathing, setting intentions and affirmations, practicing gratitude, mindful movement and body scans.

There are several ways you can continue discussing and encouraging the practice of mindfulness at home. As parents you all are most likely already utilizing self-awareness strategies that you can share with your kids. Point out moments when you are able to pay attention well and point out moments when your child is able to pay attention well then explore with them what it is that enables them to focus. During times when you or your child is struggling, prompt them to consider, "What is my body trying to tell me?" I know that when I no longer have patience with others (or myself or my dogs), when I start to take things personally, or when I'm just straight up not having fun anymore that I need to take a moment to be mindful and listen to my body. With your child, consider the following: How do you know when your energy is waning? What activities, practices or places revitalize you? Who can you call on for support when you need it? How might you create time or space to take care of yourself?

THE SOCIAL INSTITUTE

TSI was founded by Laura Tierney, a social media expert who previously managed social media for espnW, Nike, Disney, P&G, and Duke Men's Basketball. It provides a gamified, online learning platform that empowers students to navigate their social world — social media and technology — to fuel their health, happiness, and future success. By reinforcing character strengths like empathy, integrity, and teamwork and by showcasing contemporary role models, TSI uses a relevant, positive approach to inspire students to make positive, high-character choices.

#WINATSOCIAL
APP SPOTLIGHT



TRIP-UPS:

- Creating "spam accounts" and posting what you think are private posts for just your friends when they can easily be screenshot and shared
- Making their accounts public without knowing how to filter out sketchy requests and messages
- Scrolling mindlessly on the Explore page at the cost of sleep

WINNING MOVES:

- Be inspired every day by filling your Instagram feed with positive role models rather than anyone who makes you feel bad about yourself.
- Recruiters tend to look at social media so make sure your Instagram is college admissions friendly.
- Remember that Instagram stories disappear in 24 hours, but screenshots are forever.

STRONG SETTINGS:

- Protect your privacy by turning off app tracking in your device's settings.
- Instagram automatically lets other users tag you in their photos. Turn this off so that you have to approve all photos tagged with your username.
- Keep your account private so only people you approve can see your posts.
- Don't want to be bothered by what other people think? Turn off comments and hide your like count on the settings of your post.