

# The Imagine

Joyce Cooper-Kahn, PhD, interviews  
Scotty Iseri and Sherri Widen, PhD



**I**MAGINATION AND PRETEND PLAY have long been considered a foundation for the development of behavioral and emotional regulation—see, for example, the work of psychologists Dorothy and Jerome Singer. Both the process of imagining and the specific rehearsal of situations that are part of pretend play are believed to contribute to the development of self-regulation. Further, most young children find imaginative play natural and engaging, so they're drawn to programs that build on fantasy and creativity. Helping children with attention disorders to be able to manage their own feelings in healthy and productive ways is particularly important, since emotional dysregulation is often problematic for this group of kids.

Imagine Neighborhood is an example of an online, research-based resource that offers podcasts and accompanying information designed to enhance social-emotional learning in a fun format. You can learn

more, listen, and subscribe at [imagineneighborhood.org](https://www.imagineneighborhood.org).

Below, we interview the founder and host of Imagine Neighborhood, Scotty Iseri, and the show's developmental consultant, Sherri Widen, PhD.

# Neighborhood,

Where Children  
(and Adults)  
Learn About  
Feelings



**JOYCE COOPER-KAHN:** Your podcasts and activities are designed to promote social-emotional learning. Can you explain what that is and why it's important?

**SHERRI WIDEN:** Social-emotional learning (SEL) includes a number of skills. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has identified five core SEL skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Social emotional skills predict children's social skills and also their academic outcomes. That is, children with stronger social-emotional skills tend to have better relationships with peers and teachers, to be more engaged with school, and to have the skills to help them stay on task and pay attention which supports their academic success.

**COOPER-KAHN:** What is Imagine Neighborhood and who are you trying to reach? What is your target age group?

**SCOTTY ISERI:** Imagine Neighborhood is a podcast that encourages kids and their grown-ups to talk about SEL topics. It's a storytelling show where we have original stories, fun characters—like Princess Donnasaurus and Count Vacula (he's a robot vampire vacuum cleaner). In the course of each story, we use music to help give them a vocabulary to talk about their feelings. Then we take a pause at emotional high points and talk to the listeners.

We've been thinking of the show as a "family" rather than a "kids" show: We designed the show for kids and grown-ups to listen to together. Educational materials in the home need to be different from curricula for schools. Kids often develop at different rates, so something that's designed for, say, a second grader may be perfect for an especially precocious kindergartener. Generally, we've developed the show to be flexible for a kindergarten to grade 5 audience (and I know that's a broad range). The idea was that parents or caregivers would have a better sense of their kid's needs and be able to select topics based on what they felt was best.

**WIDEN:** For home learning activities, the material needs to be engaging for both parents and kids—there is no common core or education standards for home learning, and parents don't always have the background or the time to teach their kids' formal lessons. So our goal was to make the Imagine Neighborhood fun for adults and kids and embed the lesson right in the fun.

**COOPER-KAHN:** There are many programs and resources that target social-emotional learning in children. How is your program different?

**ISERI:** One of the biggest considerations for us with SEL in the home is that there's a huge variety of different contexts. A classroom is a (somewhat) controlled environment, with a daily structure and different materials. For the home, we wanted to create something that was flexible enough for parents to do in a variety of ways. While we encourage grown-ups to listen to the show with their kids (podcasts are perfect for listening to in the car), it may not always be possible. We also wanted to make it, well, fun. If kids don't want to do an educational activity at home it decreases the likelihood that they'll do it. So if we can wrap our evidence-based SEL activities in a metaphor about robots, pirates, and princesses, we can make it more enjoyable to listen to.

**WIDEN:** The Imagine Neighborhood is based on Second Step—a universal classroom SEL intervention that provides teacher-led direct instruction and teaches skills that strengthen students' ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. In the Imagine Neighborhood, we are building on Second Step in an edutainment format that is targeted to appeal to both kids and their adults.

**COOPER-KAHN:** How does your program incorporate the research on development of social-emotional functioning?

**WIDEN:** Imagine Neighborhood is based on Committee for Children's Second Step program for elementary school students. A strength of Second Step is that it is research- and evidence-based: When the curricula are developed, they are based on the current research literature to inform both the content and the approaches to teaching. And when the curricula are complete, we conduct research on Second Step to ensure that it works for teachers and students in classrooms.

**COOPER-KAHN:** We know that some groups of children are at particularly high risk for problems with emotional control, including those with the impulse control problems that often challenge children with ADHD. Does your program address these challenges?

**WIDEN:** Second Step is a curriculum that helps children learn skills like emotion management and attention, but it is intended as a universal program. So, it doesn't directly address children at high risk for problems of emotional control, but it can help them learn important skills.

**ISERI:** A lot of teachers tell us that SEL supports start in the home. So by providing these resources to parents, we're looping them in on the need for these SEL supports. If parents and teachers can be on the same page, they're better able to support children regardless of their

level of need. We do have some specific episodes that deal with issues of self-management, such as Lava Avenue (crossing the street), and the Phone Gremlin (transitioning away from activities).

**COOPER-KAHN: Your podcasts emphasize the use of imagination. Why is that important?**

**ISERI:** Using your imagination is a great gateway toward building empathy. By imagining how a character is behaving, you can really start trying to see things from someone else's point of view. Also, stories can be great vehicles for learning. By using metaphor and narrative, it can make it easier to talk about big emotions or a skill such as emotion regulation that kids are striving to learn. For example, in one episode, our character Macho Supreme is disappointed because he can't go to the Glamour Flex competition. There's a "pixie pandemic," which means everyone has to stay inside. Macho is VERY disappointed and we use that as a way to teach methods of dealing with that disappointment. As a parent I sometimes find it hard to talk about the disappointments of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Using story and imagination, it gives a way "in" to the topic for both kids and parents.

**COOPER-KAHN: Your programs are podcasts, rather than videos. Is there a specific rationale for presenting the activities and stories only through listening as opposed to doing it with simultaneous visual stimuli?**

**ISERI:** Well, as a parent myself, I care a lot about screen time. There are many, many offerings out there that use tablets, computers, or video, but it can be hard to find materials for kids that don't involve a screen. We did a project with PBS that included their great content with some in-person interventions. Many parents in that pilot group discussed their concerns with screen time for their younger kids. A podcast is a way to have some quality educational content and avoid the concern that a parent might have about putting their kids in front of more screen time.

I also feel that there's something magical about an audio experience. It expects the listener to do a little bit of the work (with their imaginations) but it also helps them build the world for themselves. We don't have "official" portraits of any of our characters, and in fact, we've gotten drawings from kids about what they think the characters look like. It's a way for them to personalize the Imagine Neighborhood. One kid's vision of Princess Donnasaurus is going to be different than another's, and I think that's something really special.

**COOPER-KAHN: Can you tell us a bit about the content of your podcasts? Would you call them educational or entertainment or both?**

**ISERI:** Well, I would definitely call it both. Making something entertaining can help educational lessons really stick. We're hearing from a lot of parents that the reminders in the podcast are really useful to them for having conversations with their kids about SEL and at the same time we hear about how they love the characters and the stories. As someone who's been trying to homeschool lately, I think the more fun you can make the educational materials, the more likely they are to get done.

**WIDEN:** The big experiment of the show was around connecting grown-ups to their kids' social-emotional development. In each episode we prompt the listeners to have a conversation around the skills we cover. For example, we might say, "Ask your grown-up how their body feels when they're angry" or "Tell your grown-up about a time you solved a problem." We are hearing from some parents that they appreciate having the reminders to have these conversations with kids, so I think it's definitely a strong resource for parents who want to help their children acquire social and emotional skills. 🗣️

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**Sherri Widen, PhD**, is the director of research for Committee for Children, where she helps find the best research on children's social and emotional development to help guide the development of curricula. She is a developmental psychologist with special interest in how children understand emotions and how adults can support their social-emotional development. Before joining Committee for Children, Widen worked at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, where she developed a text messaging intervention that helped parents support their preschoolers' school-readiness skills—including social emotional skills, literacy, and math.

**Scotty Iseri** is the host and creator of *The Imagine Neighborhood*, but his most important job is as a single dad to one human and one dog. He's an award-winning producer and sound designer, having worked in audio storytelling at Smart City Radio, the HIV Talk Radio Project, and Chicago Public Radio. Prior to *The Imagine Neighborhood*, Iseri was the creator of *The Digits*, an award-winning interactive math show, the webseries *Scotty Got an Office Job*, and *The Paper Hat Game*. He is a fellow at the Center for Asian American Media.

**Joyce Cooper-Kahn, PhD**, is a clinical child psychologist and coauthor of two books on executive functioning: *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* (Woodbine, 2008) and *Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom: A Practical Guide for Educators* (Wiley, 2013). She is co-chair of Attention's editorial advisory board.

