

National Center Brief

Social and Emotional Learning

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which children and young people acquire and develop skills that support learning, positive behavior, and constructive social relationships. These skills include recognizing and managing emotions, developing concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and effectively handling challenging situations (CASEL, 2005). Students with these skills do better in school and are more responsive to prevention programs and strategies that support positive behavioral choices (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004; Elias, 2006). Focus on SEL in schools also helps create a more positive and encouraging environment in which learning can take place.

Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL in terms of five core areas of competence. These are:

- Self-awareness: knowing what one feels, accurately assessing one's interests and strengths, and maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
- Self-management: regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and motivate oneself to persevere in overcoming obstacles, setting and monitoring progress toward the achievement of personal and academic goals, and expressing emotions appropriately
- Social awareness: being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others, recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences
- Relationship skills: establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation and resistance to inappropriate social pressure, preventing, managing, and constructively resolving interpersonal conflict, and seeking help when needed
- Responsible decision-making: making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant factors, including applicable ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms, the likely consequences of taking alternative courses of action, and respect for others (CASEL, 2003)

Children and youth who are socially and emotionally skilled:

- Have good impulse control, which helps them to pay attention in class and avoid disruptive behavior
- Can manage stress and personal worries, which enhances their ability to remember and build on what they have previously learned

- Are able to activate interest in a topic and sustain their engagement in a lesson
- Can identify personal strengths and persevere in overcoming obstacles, which helps them to set realistic academic and personal goals and maintain efforts to achieve these goals
- Can assess the emotions of others and distinguish between unintentional and deliberately disrespectful behavior. This reduces the likelihood of their making inappropriate, provocatively aggressive responses that lead to conflict or rejection by peers.
- Are better able to participate in cooperative learning activities.
- Have the communication skills needed to prevent, de-escalate, and otherwise constructively resolve interpersonal conflicts.
- Exercise good decision-making skills

Social and Emotional Learning's Benefits

Children and youth with well-developed social and emotional learning skills have:

1. Improved attitudes, including improved academic motivation, commitment to learning, and a sense of school as a caring place
2. Improved behavior, resulting in fewer absences and suspensions, more pro-social interactions, and reduced aggression, disruptive behavior, and interpersonal violence
3. Skills to enable them to avoid engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as using illegal drugs and dropping out of school
4. Improved academic performance, including improved skills and grades in math, language arts, and social studies, and better problem-solving and planning skills, and subject mastery (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003; Hawkins, 1999; Wilson et al., 2001; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2004)

SEL supports academic learning and an effective school environment. A recent meta-analysis of more than 300 research studies indicates that SEL programs significantly improve students' academic performance. The study shows, for example, that an average student enrolled in a SEL program ranks at least 10 percentage points higher on achievement tests than students who do not participate in such programs. These students are also likely to have a better grade point average, attendance records, and classroom behavior, and are less likely to be suspended or disciplined, than children who have not been exposed to SEL programs (Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P., 2005; Zins, et al., 2004). SEL programs can also significantly reduce unhealthy and risk-taking behaviors (Greenberg et al., 2003). And, there is emerging evidence that SEL programs can promote social and emotional adjustment in children (Lopes and Salovey, 2004).

Implementing SEL in Schools

SEL core competencies can be taught in dedicated SEL programs, in traditional academic courses, in prevention programs, or in cooperative-learning or service-learning programs. However, it is essential that this teaching be reinforced outside of the classroom – by, for example, enforcing behavioral

expectations consistent with SEL skills on the playground and in the lunchroom. Schools can also help parents learn how to model and reinforce these competencies at home.

Many, if not all, effective prevention programs teach some of the SEL core competencies (especially self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). When choosing a curriculum or educational program, it always is best to use programs that evaluation has shown to be effective. CASEL's *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Program* (2003) includes a systemic review of many nationally available evidence-based SEL programs and provides information on their program design, instructional practices, evidence of effectiveness (including evaluation results and whether the program appears on other Federal lists of recommended programs), and whether the program includes implementation supports and activities or tools to support a safe learning environment.

Safe and Sound lists some other factors for choosing SEL programs. These include:

- the availability of professional development and on-site observation of teachers,
- whether the program provides assessments that can measure the progress of individual students,
- whether the program provides guidelines and tools for implementing the program, and
- whether the program offered reinforcements outside of the classroom (ways for teaching and other staff to reinforce SEL throughout the school, ways for parents to become involved in the program, ways that the community can become involved with the program).

Other resources to help you choose an appropriate SEL program can be found on the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention Evidence-Based Programs Resource Page (see below).

Effectively implementing an SEL program requires changing teacher behavior, the classroom climate, and the school environment (Greenberg, Weissberg, et al. 2003). For example, effective SEL programming also involves creating school, family, and community environments that reinforce the lessons of the classroom. Methods of building such environments include infusing SEL concepts throughout the regular academic curriculum, actively engaging students in the learning process, providing opportunities for participation, collaboration, and service, creating a supportive learning community with respectful relationships and trust, and involving families and the community in schools.

New educational initiatives (such as health education) are often perceived as distractions from the primary mission of public education. However, the demonstrated ability of SEL to promote academic achievement and enhance the behavioral outcomes of prevention programming shows that SEL strengthens rather than competes with the established goals of public education and is an essential tool for providing children with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in 21st century America.

References:

This Prevention Brief is largely based upon work done by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Resources on SEL (including Safe and Sound and the Guidelines for Effective SEL Practice) can be found on the [CASEL](#) Web site.