

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

SEL is a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. SEL teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically.

These skills include recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. They are the skills that allow children to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices.

Many of the programs that teach SEL skills have now been rigorously evaluated and found to have positive impacts. According to reliable research, schools are a highly effective setting for teaching SEL skills.

SEL is also a framework for school improvement. Teaching SEL skills helps create and maintain safe, caring learning environments. The most beneficial programs provide sequential and developmentally appropriate instruction in SEL skills. They are implemented in a coordinated manner, schoolwide, from preschool through high school. Lessons are reinforced in the classroom, during out-of-school activities, and at home. Educators receive ongoing professional development in SEL. And families and schools work together to promote children's social, emotional, and academic success.

Skills & Competencies

Social & Emotional Learning Core Competencies



CASEL has identified five core groups of social and emotional competencies:

Self-awareness—accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence

Self-management—regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; 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; recognizing and using family, school, and community resources

Relationship skills—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed

Responsible decision-making—making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community

With regard to *self-awareness*, children in the elementary grades should be able to recognize and accurately label simple emotions such as sadness, anger, and happiness. In middle school, students should be able to analyze factors that trigger their stress reactions. Students in high school are expected to analyze how various expressions of emotion affect other people.

With regard to *self-management*, elementary school children are expected to describe the steps of setting and working toward goals. In middle school they should be able to set and make a plan to achieve a short-term personal or academic goal. High school students should be able to identify strategies to make use of available school and community resources and overcome obstacles in achieving a long-term goal.

In the area of *social awareness*, elementary school students should be able to identify verbal, physical, and situational cues indicating how others feel. Those in middle school should be able to predict others’ feelings and perspectives in various situations. High school students should be able to evaluate their ability to empathize with others.

In the area of *relationship skills*, in elementary school, students should have an ability to describe approaches to making and keeping friends. Middle school students are expected to demonstrate cooperation and teamwork to promote group goals. In high school students are expected to evaluate uses of communication skills with peers, teachers, and family members.

Finally, with regard to *responsible decision-making*, elementary school students should be able to identify a range of decisions they make at school. Middle school students should be able to evaluate strategies for resisting peer pressure to engage in unsafe or unethical activities. High-school students should be able to analyze how their current decision-making affects their college and career prospects.

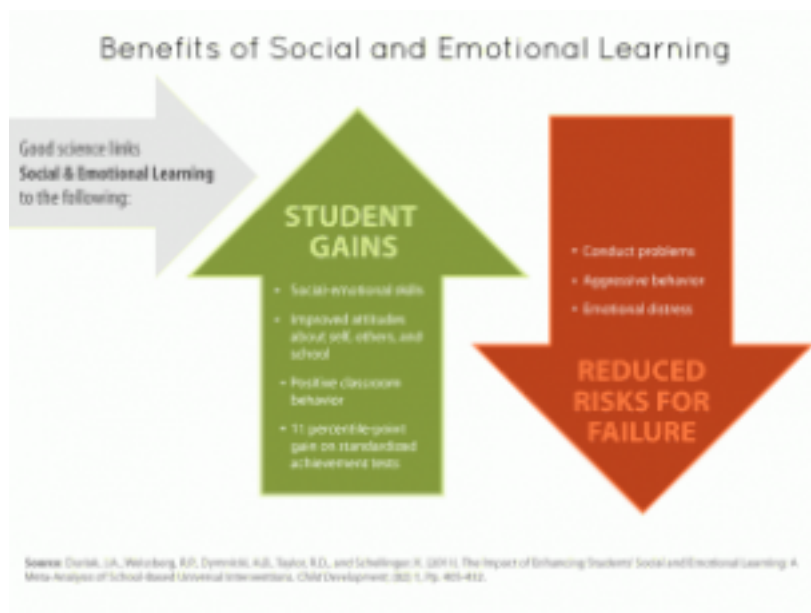
Climate & Connectedness

Within caring learning communities, there are respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents. Students have opportunities to collaborate with others, as well as to experience autonomy and influence, and there is a sense of shared purpose and ideals among all members of the community. In such communities, students and faculty and staff look forward to walking through the schoolhouse door.

There is solid evidence demonstrating that student attachment to school is strongly influenced by the learning environment. Classroom and school interventions that make the learning environment safer, more caring, better managed, more participatory, and that enhance students' social competence, have been shown to increase student attachment to school. In turn, students who are more engaged and attached to school have better attendance and higher graduation rates, as well as higher grades and standardized tests scores.

Research also indicates that attachment to school decreases the prevalence of high-risk behaviors. Interventions that improve classroom climate and functioning, and enhance student attachment to school, decrease rates of high-risk behaviors. When students are attached to school and to pro-social teachers and peers, they are more likely to behave in pro-social ways themselves, and to avoid engaging in high-risk behaviors. Providing students with opportunities for participation may also increase students' intrinsic motivation to behave in pro-social ways, thereby decreasing school crime and other forms of deviant behavior in the school setting.

Benefits of SEL



Schools that create socially and emotionally sound learning and working environments, and that help students and staff develop greater social and emotional competence, in turn help ensure positive short- and long-term academic and personal outcomes for students, and higher levels of teaching and work satisfaction for staff.

SEL improves students' positive behavior and reduces negative behavior.

It *promotes* young people's academic success, health, and well-being at the same time that it *prevents* a variety of problems such as alcohol and drug use, violence, truancy, and bullying.

A large body of scientific research has determined that effective SEL in schools significantly improves students':

- Social-emotional skills

- Attitudes about self and others

- Social interactions

It also decreases their levels of emotional distress and conduct problems.

SEL is also associated with significant improvements in students' academic performance and attitudes toward school.

A landmark review found that students who receive SEL instruction had more positive attitudes about school and improved an average of 11 percentile points on standardized achievement tests compared to students who did not receive such instruction.

SEL prepares young people for success in adulthood.

SEL helps students become good communicators, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders, and caring, concerned members of their communities. It teaches them how to set and achieve goals and how to persist in the face of challenges. These are precisely the skills that today's employers consider important for the workforce of the future.

SEL FAQs

What is social and emotional learning (SEL)?

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. Although SEL is not a program, many available programs provide instruction in and opportunities to practice, apply, and be recognized for using SEL skills. Competence in the use of SEL skills is promoted in the context of safe and supportive school, family, and community learning environments in which children feel valued and respected and connected to and engaged in learning. SEL is fundamental not only to children's social and emotional development but also to their health, ethical development, citizenship, motivation to achieve, and academic learning as well. (Elias et al., 1997, and *CASEL, Safe and Sound*, 2005)

Why is SEL needed?

There are a great deal of data indicating that large numbers of children are contending with significant social, emotional, and mental health barriers to their success in school and life. In addition, many children engage in challenging behaviors that educators must address to provide high quality instruction.

A 2003 Search Institute survey of 202 U.S. communities found that:

Only 29% of students in 6th through 12th grade thought their school provided them with a caring, encouraging environment.

The same percentage reported that that people who know them well would say they know how to plan ahead and make choices.

Data reported by the Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force in its 2003 Final Report state that:

- At least 1 child in 10 suffers from a mental illness that severely disrupts daily functioning at home, in school, or in the community.
- 70-80% of children in need don't receive appropriate mental health services.
- 25-30% of American children experience school adjustment problems.
- 32% of children (including toddlers) at 10 Chicago childcare centers are deemed to have behavioral problems.
- 14% of students 12-18 years of age report having been bullied at school in the six months prior to being interviewed.
- Providing children with comprehensive social and emotional learning (SEL) programs characterized by safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments and instruction in social and emotional skills addresses many of these learning barriers through enhancing school attachment, reducing risky behaviors and promoting positive development, and thereby positively influencing academic achievement.

Why is SEL essential to the school and life success of all children and youth?

Our emotions and relationships affect how and what we learn and how we use what we learn in work, family, and community contexts. On the one hand, emotions can enable us to generate an active interest in learning and sustain our engagement in it. On the other hand, unmanaged stress and poor regulation of impulses interfere with attention and memory and contribute to behaviors disruptive to learning. Moreover, learning is an intrinsically social and interactive process: it takes place in collaboration with one's teachers, in the company of one's peers, and with the support of one's family. Hence, the abilities to recognize and manage emotions and establish and maintain positive relationships impact both preparation for learning and the ability to benefit from learning opportunities. Because safe, nurturing, well-managed learning environments are essential to the mastery of SEL skills, they too are essential to children's school and life success. SEL skills and the supportive learning environments in which they are taught contribute to the resiliency of all children—those without identified risks and those at-risk for or already exhibiting emotional or behavioral problems and in need of additional supports.

What skills do socially and emotionally competent children and youth have?

Socially and emotionally competent children and youth are skilled in five core areas:

They are **self-aware**. They are able to recognize their emotions, describe their interests and values, and accurately assess their strengths. They have a well-grounded sense of self-confidence and hope for the future.

They are able to **regulate their emotions**. They are able to manage stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles. They can set and monitor progress toward the achievement of personal and academic goals and express their emotions appropriately in a wide range of situations.

They are **socially aware**. They are able to take the perspective of and empathize with others and recognize and appreciate individual and group similarities and differences. They are able to seek out and appropriately use family, school, and community resources.

They have **good relationship skills**. They can establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation. They resist inappropriate social pressure; constructively prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict; and seek and provide help when needed.

They demonstrate **responsible decision-making** at school, at home, and in the community. In making decisions, they consider ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and the likely consequences of various courses of action. They apply these decision-making skills in academic and social situations and are motivated to contribute to the well-being of their schools and communities.

What instructional methods are commonly used in SEL?

Effective instructional methods for teaching SEL skills are active, participatory, and engaging. Here are a few examples:

- Young children can be taught through modeling and coaching to recognize how they feel or how someone else might be feeling.
- Prompting the use of a conflict-resolution skill and using dialoguing to guide students through the steps can be an effective approach to helping them apply a skill in a new situation.
- In class meetings, students can practice group decision-making and setting classroom rules.
- Students can learn cooperation and teamwork through participation in team sports and games.
- Students deepen their understanding of a current or historical event by applying it to a set of questions based on a problem-solving model.
- Cross-age mentoring, in which a younger student is paired with an older one, can be effective in building self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and enhancing academic skills.
- Having one member of a pair describe a situation to his partner and having the partner repeat what he or she heard is an effective tool in teaching reflective listening.

What can principals do to promote SEL?

As the primary leader in a local school, principals have a major responsibility for implementing SEL programming. Principals can support SEL programming by:

- Indicating to school personnel and families that they are committed to school-wide SEL as a priority
- Developing and articulating a shared vision of their students' social, emotional, and academic development
- Supporting completion of a school-wide needs and resources assessment
- Creating opportunities for teachers and support staff to participate in development of an action plan for SEL implementation
- Assuring that all staff members have initial and on-going professional development and support for implementing programming
- Making sufficient resources available for implementing the SEL action plan
- Involving others in exercising school leadership functions and decision-making
- Modeling win-win resolutions to conflict

What can teachers do to promote SEL?

In addition to providing instruction in social and emotional skills, teachers' involvement in promoting SEL goes beyond the classroom and includes the following:

- Participating on a school team or committee that selects an SEL program and oversees the implementation and evaluation of SEL activities
- Communicating regularly with students' families about SEL classroom activities to encourage reinforcement of SEL lessons at home
- Modeling and providing opportunities for students to practice and apply SEL skills in the classroom
- Using participatory instructional methods that draw on students' experience and engage them in learning
- Using SEL skills in teaching academic subjects to enhance students' understanding. For example, in language arts or social studies lessons, students can be encouraged to discuss how characters or historical figures did or did not express understanding of others' feelings or use good problem-solving skills

What can parents do to promote their child's SEL?

Parents can promote their child's SEL by learning more about their school's SEL initiative and modeling behaviors and adopting practices that reinforce their child's SEL skills at home.

Examples of such efforts include:

- Participating in family informational meetings at their school to learn more about its SEL initiative
- Asking their child's teacher about how SEL is used at school
- Participating in their school's planning, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programming
- Participating in SEL trainings to become more familiar with SEL concepts being taught in their child's school
- Volunteering to assist in their child's classroom
- Participating with their child in SEL-related homework assignments
- Emphasizing their child's strengths before discussing what might be improved upon.
- Making a list of feeling words with their child and being an "emotions coach," encouraging him/her child to express feelings.
- Giving their children choices, asking what they can do to solve a problem and helping them identify pros and cons of alternative solutions
- Making sure that the consequences of misbehavior are fair and consistently enforced
- Encouraging their child to share and be helpful to others by participating in community service projects

What can student support services professionals do to promote SEL?

Student support services (SSS) professionals' knowledge of human behavior, program planning and evaluation, community resources, classroom management strategies, and the challenges to learning that students may be experiencing at home make them valuable members of an SEL steering committee. Their perspective on student needs and the resources being used to address these needs is essential to an adequate SEL needs and resources assessment. Since their work is not confined to the classroom, they also bring an important perspective to identifying school-wide SEL programming needs.

In small group work, SSS professionals can reinforce classroom instruction in SEL skills with students who need more practice. When conferring with parents on approaches to addressing learning challenges their child is experiencing, SSS professionals can use SEL language, which has been introduced in the classroom. When consulting with teachers on classroom management issues, they can assess problems and suggest solutions with reference to SEL skills and the characteristics of a safe and supportive learning environment. When developing and assessing student progress on IEP goals, they can relate these goals to specific SEL standards. SSS staff are also typically the link between schools and the community-based services that students may access. As such, they can extend the SEL framework to these relationships as well.

Finally, coordinating classroom-based SEL instruction with services provided by student support staff can be especially effective in promoting the school success of children who have social, emotional, and mental health problems that interfere with learning.

What are the components of evidence-based school-wide SEL programming?

Effective SEL programming includes:

- Instruction in and opportunities to practice and apply an integrated set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills
- Learning environments characterized by trust and respectful relationships
- Implementation that is coordinated and reinforces classroom, school-wide, out-of-school, and at-home learning activities
- Systematic and sequential programming from preschool through high school
- Developmentally and culturally appropriate behavioral supports
- On-going monitoring and evaluation of implementation for continuous improvement

Effective SEL programming provides students with opportunities to contribute to their communities, families with opportunities to enhance their children's social and emotional development, school personnel (administrators, teachers, student support services, and support staff) with ongoing professional development, and community groups that affect the lives of children and youth (e.g., after-school and before-school programs, juvenile justice, mental health and health care providers groups) with opportunities to partner with schools (Elias et al., 1997; and CASEL, *Safe and Sound*, 2005).

Why is it important to use an evaluated, evidence-based SEL curriculum?

Many available SEL programs have core elements based on an underlying theory of how desired student changes are achieved. Schools interested in implementing an SEL program are urged to start by familiarizing themselves with a few such programs, as reviewed in CASEL's Safe and Sound, 2005. This will give them a better understanding of how these programs work and enable them to adapt such a program to meet the needs of their students and get buy-in from their teachers without compromising the integrity of its core elements. Educators who pick and choose activities and strategies from one or more programs run the risk of missing some of these core elements and as a result not achieving the desired results with their students. Such an approach also may contribute to further programmatic fragmentation or result in conflicts with other programs already in place. Using a well-designed and evaluated program is also much less work for educators than creating their own program from pieces of existing programs.

How is SEL related to other youth development and prevention initiatives?

SEL addresses the social and emotional variables that place youth at risk for school failure (e.g., lack of attachment to a significant adult, inability to regulate emotions) or promote school success (e.g., ability to empathize with and work with others, effective conflict resolution skills). In addressing these variables, SEL provides educators with a common language and framework to organize their activities, thus overcoming fragmentation, minimizing competition for resources, and undermining program effectiveness. Many examples illustrate this link between SEL and other youth development and prevention initiatives. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is being used by many Illinois schools as the common basis for their discipline system, and educators are exploring how it relates to the universal programming being implemented to address the SEL standards. Another example is character education, for which SEL can provide an essential skill foundation for achieving positive outcomes such as responsible and respectful behavior. Similarly, service-learning opportunities provide ideal situations for applying SEL skills, while these skills also enhance the quality of service-learning experiences. In health education and promotion classes, SEL skills provide a coordinating framework for addressing the risk and protective factors shared by many health conditions.

Where can I find funding to support SEL programming?

As a starting point, school improvement planning teams should examine how current prevention and youth development efforts could be best coordinated to offer quality SEL programming. Are current practices efficient? Is money being spent on redundant or ineffective programming? Can current programming be changed to make it less expensive, or can several existing programs be replaced with one more comprehensive effort? Can an SEL program that effectively prevents disruptive classroom behavior and promotes engagement in learning actually save time and dollars in the long run? Can the instructional day be reallocated to allow time for SEL professional development?