

Social and Emotional Learning and Behavioral Skills Development

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These skills are foundational to a child’s development, impacting their success in school, work, and life (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021a). Skill development is key to mitigating impacts of stress and trauma. A significant factor common to resilient children—including those living in adverse conditions—is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behaviors.

Evidence base

Students who receive SEL instruction tend to have better academic outcomes. A large-scale study showed that when a student participated in an SEL program, there was, on average, an academic achievement gain of 11 percentage points (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Behaviorally, schools that implement SEL programs often observe reductions in aggression, noncompliance, and other behavioral problems in students as well as a noted decrease in anxiety and depression (Durlak et al., 2011).

Long term, students who receive SEL and behavioral skills training have higher graduation rates, more college attendance, fewer mental health disorders, and fewer criminal offenses in adulthood (Jones et al., 2015).

Furthermore, investment in SEL and behavioral skills training on average results in a return of \$11 for every \$1 invested due to the benefits of a reduction in juvenile crime, higher lifetime earnings, and better physical and mental health (Belfield et al., 2015).



Implementation considerations

SEL and behavioral skill development requires numerous considerations to ensure success, including the following.

Comprehensive integration

When possible, SEL and behavioral skills should not be treated as a separate entity or subject but rather integrated across subjects and woven into the curriculum, school culture, and community partnerships (CASEL, 2021b).

Stakeholder buy-in

A key component of successful implementation of SEL and behavioral skills is gaining support and buy-in from critical stakeholders such as educators, school administrators, parents, and students (Osher et al., 2016).

Professional development

Teachers and staff need high-quality onboarding and continuous development to understand SEL strategies as well as implementation support from administrators or instructional support staff (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Culturally relevant curriculum

The SEL and behavioral skills should be sensitive to and consider the background of the students. A culturally responsive SEL program builds on culturally proficient practices by affirming and supporting cultural identities and by intentionally learning about and integrating knowledge of students' culture and identities into SEL instruction. This might require adapting the learning to fit various cultures, languages, and student experiences (Jagers et al., 2018).

Explicit SEL Instruction

Schools can choose implement curricula that explicitly teach SEL skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Programs like Second Step and others have been shown to be effective in promoting these skills (Early Intervention Foundation, 2019).

Continuous assessment and evaluation

Just like other program or curricular implementation, SEL and behavioral skill development should undergo periodic assessment to measure effectiveness and make adjustments. Special attention should be given to the fidelity of implementation at both the campus and classroom level as well as the impact on student academic and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

School climate

A supportive school environment that promotes positive relationships, safety, and engagement can enhance the effectiveness of SEL and behavioral learning. SEL principles should be part of life on the campus (Thapa et al., 2013).

Scalability

As an SEL program progresses, considerations regarding scalability, sustainability, and the potential for broadening or narrowing the development of behavioral and SEL skills should be addressed (Jones et al., 2012).

Family and community engagement

Effective SEL and behavioral learning programs go beyond the classroom and involves communities and families to reinforce and extend concepts and practices. Consider events or communication that onboard the parents and encourage their participation in the students' learning (Patrikakou, 2008).

Monitoring and evaluation

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary to assess the effectiveness of SEL programs. Schools should collect data on student outcomes, teacher practices, and overall school climate to make informed decisions and adjustments to their SEL implementation strategies (Early Intervention Foundation, 2019).

Implementation resources

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

The CASEL [program guide](#) (n.d.) aims to help educators and school administrators select an evidence-based SEL program that best meets the needs of their community.

Milestones for implementation

If you need more support or a guidelines for implementation please see this [milestones guide](#) from the Alaska Transforming Schools: Trauma-Engaged Toolkit (Alaska Department of Early Education and Development, n.d.)

This handout summarizes the evidence base and implementation considerations for teaching SEL and behavioral skills and providing staff with professional learning on SEL development, a trauma-engaged practice from the [Transforming Schools: Trauma-Engaged Toolkit](#) (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development [AK DEED], n.d.). Leadership teams from Alaska Alternative School Coalition schools can use these evidence briefs to make decisions about which trauma-engaged practice to field test.

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