

What Does Evidence-Based Instruction in Social and Emotional Learning Actually Look Like in Practice?



A Brief on Findings from CASEL's Program Reviews

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Abstract

In this brief we use the CASEL reviews of evidence-based programs to answer the question, “What do teachers and other adults actually need to do in the classroom and school to help students achieve the goals laid out in social and emotional learning (SEL) standards?” Specifically, we identify and describe four approaches that have been successfully used to promote social and emotional development in students. One approach uses free-standing lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach students’ social and emotional competencies. The second approach uses general teaching practices to create classroom and schoolwide conditions that facilitate and support social and emotional development in students. A third approach integrates skill instruction or practices that support SEL within the context of an academic curriculum. The fourth approach provides school leaders with guidance on how to facilitate SEL as a schoolwide initiative. The identification of these four approaches and types of strategies that support each one should help school leaders and teachers develop a comprehensive plan for developing students’ social and emotional competencies.

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In our work with states developing learning standards to articulate what students should know and be able to do in terms of their social and emotional development (Dusenbury et al., 2015), we have found that state teams often struggle with an immediate question from their stakeholders and constituents: How can teachers effectively promote or teach social and emotional competence to achieve these standards? Put another way: What do teachers and other adults actually need to do in the classroom and school to help students achieve the goals laid out in social and emotional learning (SEL) standards?

Several authors have begun to explore this question at different grade levels (e.g., Bierman, & Motamedi, 2015; Jagers, Harris, & Skoog, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman, & Hulleman, 2015; Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015). Denham (2015) has done the important work of identifying key developmental tasks related to social and emotional competence at different ages from preschool through high school (See Table 1 on the next page).

In the past 15 years CASEL has produced three separate guides to evidence-based programs designed to promote student social and emotional development (CASEL, 2003; CASEL 2013; CASEL, 2015) In 2003 CASEL published *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs*, which reviewed 80 SEL programs. From these we identified 22 “SElect” programs that, according to rigorous research, led to positive outcomes in students’ academic achievement and behavior. Ten years later we published the [2013 Guide to Preschool and Elementary Programs](#), in which we identified 23 SElect programs that produced meaningful outcomes in terms of student academic, social, and emotional behaviors. Most recently we released the [2015 Guide to Middle and High School Programs](#), which identified nine SElect programs. We believe our reviews of the actual content of evidence-based programs

can inform the answers to the important question of how adults can effectively promote student SEL in the classroom and school. The purpose of this brief is to draw on these previous reviews of evidence-based programs to identify and describe the most common strategies used to promote student SEL.

Four Strategies that Promote SEL

In all of CASEL’s program reviews from preschool through high school, and across all the many programs we have reviewed, we have observed that evidence-based SEL programs use one or more of the following four approaches to promoting social and emotional competence across the five core competency clusters (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).

1. Free-standing lessons that provide explicit, step-by-step instructions to teach students social and emotional competencies across the five core competency clusters—on age-appropriate topics such as labeling feelings, coping with anxiety or stress, setting and achieving goals, developing empathy and compassion, communicating effectively, resolving conflict, being assertive, and making responsible decisions. Classroom activities develop specific skills using strategies that are sequenced within and across lessons (Durlak et al., 2011). They rely on active learning techniques, such as discussions, small-group work, and role plays, and appropriate levels of cognitive complexity for different grade levels (Bloom et al., 1956) to engage students (Aldrege, 2015). The most effective lessons provide explicit instruction and promote generalization by including opportunities for practicing skills beyond the lesson and throughout the day, or through connections during academic lessons. Some programs using this approach also help teachers build positive relationships with students and create a warm and inclusive classroom environment.

The Case for Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student and citizen.

Extensive research, including a meta-analysis of 213 studies, has shown that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence in students produce important outcomes including improvements in standardized academic test scores that are, on average, 11 percentile points higher for students who received SEL programming compared to students who did not receive SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, high-quality instruction in SEL has been associated with reduced problem behaviors including conduct problems, drug use, and violence (e.g., Botvin et al., 1995; Farrell & Meyer, 2001). The cost-effectiveness of these approaches has also been established in a recent report finding that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence produce, on average, a benefit to cost ratio of 11:1 (Belfield et al., 2015).

- An SEL lesson conducted in a preschool classroom might teach children how to identify happy, sad, and angry feelings using puppets and include a discussion about the types of events that trigger these feelings. Preschool students might also receive a lesson on how to calm down and solve interpersonal conflicts using a few simple steps (e.g., stop and take a breath, say how you feel and why, let the other person say how they feel and why, and decide together what you can do).
- An SEL lesson in an elementary class might have a lesson on how to label feelings using words like “pleasant,” “happy,” “irritated,” or “angry.” Students might learn a variety of techniques for managing anxiety and stress such as deep breathing or yoga. Other activities might include reading a story and reflecting on the content to explore different perspectives and feelings of others. Students might also engage in activities that require them to work together as a class to set and achieve a community improvement goal. They might also learn steps for solving interpersonal problems.
- An SEL lesson in a middle or high school classroom might involve building students’ vocabulary for describing their feelings as well as a discussion of mixed emotions. Students might also explore the fact that different people can experience different feelings in a similar situation. SEL lessons geared for adolescents often include practical strategies for coping with stress, anxiety, or anger (e.g., deep breathing, mental rehearsal, muscle relaxation, or visualization). They might include a focus on personal competence. For example, students might be asked to identify a personal goal such as raising a grade in math or improving time running the 100-yard dash, including monitoring their progress toward achieving the goal over several weeks. As part of their goal-setting project students might also learn a variety of techniques for reinforcing themselves and maintaining a high level of motivation. SEL lessons at the secondary level also focus on building students’ interpersonal skills. Lessons on social awareness might involve opportunities for students to work with partners and engage in discussion in order to learn about different perspectives and to develop empathy and respect for others. They might learn specific social skills (e.g. listening) or a set of steps for a specific skill (e.g., how to begin, maintain, and end conversations; how to build positive relationships; how to resist unwanted peer pressure). Conflict resolution strategies at the secondary level tend to be more complex than at the elementary school level and may include multiple additional steps such as stop, calm down, identify the problem, identify alternative solutions, research and evaluate possible solutions, choose the best solution, try it out, and evaluate whether it was an effective solution.
- Across all developmental levels, the “free-standing lesson” approach also promotes SEL throughout the whole school and beyond. It fosters a positive school climate by providing teachers and staff with common language, goals, and strategies for SEL. Strategies that students learn as part of SEL are most effective when

Table 1. Developmental Tasks of Social and Emotional Competence Across the Grade Spans*

Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become and be engaged, socially and academically, • Manage emotions (appropriately for a young child), especially with adult support. • Stay connected to adults, while beginning to develop peer relationships. • In play and learning, pay attention and follow directions, wait, sit still, and effectively join and leave groups.
Elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become increasingly successful at navigating peer relationships and friendships independent of adult support. • Show and share emotions appropriately, and with appropriate people.
Middle and High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form closer relationships with peers of both genders. • Manage increasingly complex academic content and tasks, with increasing independence from adults. • Effectively manage transitions to middle and high school. • Increase independence from adults. • Begin preparing for adult roles (e.g., become more nurturing to younger children, begin preparing and practicing for work roles). • Develop an ethical value system that allows for responsible decision-making and responsible behavior toward self and others.

*Drawn from Denham (2015).

everyone in the building is familiar with them, so that they can support their use throughout the day and in real-life situations that occur outside lesson times and in settings other than the classroom. Across all developmental levels parents and caregivers also receive information about how they can reinforce student learning at home. They might also receive report cards that describe students' progress on social and emotional dimensions. Parents and community members might be invited to help or participate in lessons and activities, and students might be involved in service learning activities that give them an opportunity to practice new skills at the same time they make a positive contribution to their community.

2. General teaching practices that create classroom and schoolwide conditions that facilitate and support social and emotional development in students. Although SEL teaching practices are similar across the different developmental levels, the specific interactions and techniques teachers are encouraged to use vary according to the students' developmental stages. This approach includes general teaching practices designed to:

- Establish positive and predictable classroom environments using:
 - ⇒ Shared expectations or classroom rules that teachers and students develop together to establish positive social norms for the classroom (e.g., listen respectfully when others are speaking).
 - ⇒ Practices that reflect and communicate high expectations for achievement.
- Promote positive teacher-student relationships, including, for example:
 - ⇒ Routines and structures such as morning check-ins or conflict resolution/peace corners. At the middle or high school level a program might also use advisory periods to create small groups that stay together across grades.
 - ⇒ Practices that help establish positive and trusting relationships among teachers, students, and peers (e.g., welcoming students to the class by name and interacting with students in a respectful way that promotes trust and models desired behaviors).
 - ⇒ Strategies that help teachers learn how to use cooperative learning in a way that establishes trust between students and teachers, and also provides students with opportunities to develop positive relationship skills with peers.
- Provide ongoing instructional practices that support students' SEL, including guidance for teachers on:

- ⇒ How to ask questions in a way that will support and encourage students' authentic voice (e.g., "Tell me about your favorite passage in the poem, and why you liked it.").
- ⇒ How to create opportunities for students to explore their own interests and develop their own strengths (e.g., a kindergarten teacher might set up centers for different types of imaginative play; a third-grade teacher might have students create an art project that celebrates what they're passionate about; a middle school teacher might have students write an essay about their dreams for the future; and a high school teacher might help students identify community mentors for independent field work);
- ⇒ How to provide students with authentic feedback (e.g., a kindergarten teacher might observe, "I saw the way you waited your turn to hold the bunny just now. I know it can be hard to wait your turn, but you crossed your arms to keep your hands to yourself. I saw you take a breath to calm down. I was proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself." A high school teacher might offer, "I know how you feel about public speaking, but I saw the way you took a couple of deep breaths before you gave your report. Your delivery was easy to follow, and you didn't rush.")
- ⇒ How to create events or classroom traditions that involve family and community members in meaningful ways in the life of the classroom and school.
- ⇒ Instructional practices such as project-based learning, creating opportunities for students to develop and voice their own ideas and develop the skills needed to get along with others.
- ⇒ As students become older and more idealistic, how to effectively use community service and real-life application of developing skills and student voice in field-based learning activities.

3. Integration of skill instruction and practices that support SEL within the context of an academic curriculum.

Examples of this type of program approach include:

- *4Rs* (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) is a program at the elementary level (K-8) that teaches SEL as part of a language arts curriculum that also promotes reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As described in the *2013 CASEL Guide*, *4Rs* provides grade-specific materials that include book talks, read-alouds, and interactive lessons to develop social and emotional skills.

- *The RULER Approach* to social and emotional learning is a schoolwide approach designed to promote emotional literacy. Key “anchor” skills include recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions. As described in the *2013 CASEL Guide*, teachers learn and then teach the anchor skills to develop self-awareness, perspective-taking ability, and empathy to create a positive classroom and school climate. Teachers learn how to integrate the RULER approach into their standard curriculum, and they also provide students with a vocabulary that supports emotional literacy.
- At the middle school level, *Expeditionary Learning* promotes students’ social and emotional development through teaching practices and through integration with academic curricula. For example, the program offers an open-source English Language Arts curriculum designed to build cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity.
- *Facing History and Ourselves* is a social studies or history curriculum at the middle and high school level that focuses on historical examples of intergroup conflict involving racism and prejudice. The program helps students develop awareness of self and others and build relationship skills through classroom activities while at the same time learning social studies and history. The program promotes deep awareness and respect for diversity. Its teaching practices help teachers create a supportive and democratic classroom environment that fosters civic learning and social and ethical reflection.

4. Guidance to administrators and school leaders on how to facilitate SEL as a schoolwide initiative by restructuring the school’s organizational structures, operations, and academic, social, and emotional learning goals. Evidence-based programs that take this approach might also provide school leaders with a variety of resources and guidance on the following processes:

- How to form an SEL leadership team.
- How to create a schoolwide vision for SEL, including, for example, schoolwide goals and objectives, mission statements, and strategic plans.
- How to conduct a needs assessment to identify strengths and areas for improvement that are important to SEL implementation.
- How to develop learning standards and policies that will support students’ social and emotional development.
- How to select evidence-based programs to support SEL.
- How to integrate SEL programming into all aspects of the school’s functioning.
- How to plan for professional learning for all staff.
- How to use data to inform decisions that involve students’ academic, social, and emotional learning.
- How to monitor progress toward SEL goals.

In short, this fourth approach creates policies and organizational structures within a school or school system that support students’ social and emotional development.

Supporting SEL with Standards

The identification of these four approaches and the types of strategies that support each one should help school leaders and teachers develop a comprehensive plan to foster social and emotional learning at the same time it creates positive classroom conditions and school climates. Several states and school districts are laying the foundation for these strategies in their learning standards. For example, Kansas has developed instructional examples for [personal development](#), [social development](#) and [character development](#) from kindergarten through high school. Anchorage, Alaska has identified “[sample activities](#)” that correspond to each of their standards, from early elementary through high school. Many of the [Illinois performance descriptors](#) could also be used to develop instructional activities that support SEL. We look forward to using the findings from CASEL’s program reviews to identify and describe evidence-based practices in more detail and with examples based on actual school and classroom practice.

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