



# What's the Secret to Advancing Children's Development and Use of Social-Emotional Learning Skills?

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# Why Now, Which Skills, and How?

**Social-emotional learning (SEL)** has been defined as the “*process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to identify and manage emotions; to care about others; to make good decisions; to behave ethically and responsibly; to develop positive relationships; and to avoid negative behaviors*” (Elias & Moceris, 2012, p. 424). SEL skills typically are conceptualized as a specific set of behaviors that individuals use to successfully complete a social task such as entering a peer group, asking for assistance from a teacher, making friends, or playing a game with another person. When you think about it, many learning situations at school require social tasks such as listening to others when they are reading, collaborating with a group of classmates to write a story or solve mathematics problems, or working in a team in a chemistry lab to conduct a study. More simply, the process of learning is facilitated by an array of social tasks that are acquired when SEL skills are taught (Elliott & Gresham, 2017). Therefore, students who develop and use key SEL skills are likely to have many social and academic successes that ultimately contribute to a positive learning environment for all.

Recent surveys of educational stakeholders, especially school principals and teachers, report they want their school to be a positive learning environment for all students. For example, in the *Annual PDK poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools* (2017), 82% of respondents indicated it was “highly important for schools to help students develop interpersonal skills, such as being cooperative, respectful of others, and persistent at solving problems” (p. 5). This common desire, however, is difficult to achieve for a number of reasons. One big reason is that many students are not ready to work and learn together, some students are unhappy, and others need extra attention and help. In addition, many educators do not feel prepared to undertake a new program that some fear will take time away from academics and require substantial resources.

The solution to these challenges involves teaching. Just as with academic skills, students must practice the skills needed to communicate, cooperate, assert needs, engage with others, be empathic, and control behavior and emotions. This solution is achievable and effective, and there is evidence to prove it! In the remainder of this paper, background information and evidence is provided to support the use of an effective SEL program.

## Why all the interest in children's social-emotional learning?

Educational stakeholders offer a number of reasons why they are interested in advancing children's SEL skills. Parents want their children to be successful in life; employers want productive workers; health professionals strive for wellbeing; government leaders want safe and respectful citizens; and, of course, educators want successful learners. The common thread with regard to these childhood outcomes for all stakeholders involves the need to develop social-emotional skills to regulate intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors.



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The desires of educational stakeholders today, coupled with the promise of decades of social behavior research and the advocacy efforts of several education focused foundations, has led to a consensus that schools need to do more to help students develop key SEL skills. Research has demonstrated, for example, that social-emotional learning (SEL) skills are important: 1) for students to meet the challenges of learning, 2) to help them prevent risky personal behaviors, 3) to prepare them for the demands of a changing workplace, and ultimately, 4) to promote their wellbeing (e.g., DiPerna, Volpe, & Elliott, 2002; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elliott, Frey, & Davies, 2015). Further, the research of DiPerna, Volpe, and Elliott (2002) effectively highlighted the role that social-emotional skills (which they called interpersonal skills) play in the reading and mathematical achievement of students. As illustrated in their data-based model for reading achievement, it is clear that interpersonal skills play a major role as **academic enablers** for many students.

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Model of Academic Achievement [1]

This model of academic performance was also replicated for mathematics (DiPerna, Volpe, & Elliott, 2005). As highlighted by this model, interpersonal or social-emotional skills play a pivotal causal role in motivation and engagement, two learning process variables that *virtually all educators strive to influence*.

Much more research on the potential benefits of SEL skills in school, the workplace, and beyond exist. A few examples are:

- Social and emotional skills pay dividends in academic performance and other measures of well-being kindergarten through high school (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Students who received SEL instruction had achievement scores that averaged 11 percentile points higher than those who did not. Acquisition of social and emotional skills contributed to better academic performance and improved attitudes and behaviors. SEL interventions were also found to reduce emotional stress in many students.
- Children with parents and caregivers who are knowledgeable about SEL skills and engaged in their child’s education have higher test scores, better grades, higher attendance and course-completion rates, greater enrollment in more challenging academic programs, and improved behavior and social skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).



- A projected 65% of children entering grade school today will work in jobs that do not exist today, a transformation that will require social and emotional skills such as initiative and adaptability, to navigate. Economists expect the emerging labor market will require workers to be able to solve unstructured problems, work with new information and people in multiple locations, and to carry out non-routine tasks (Levy & Murnane, 2013). To succeed at the tasks that have been projected, individuals must be able to analyze problems without the benefit of an instruction sheet and communicate their findings to others, across borders and time zones.

Finally, in a report entitled *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD, 2015) longitudinal analysis across nine countries showed that having a balanced set of cognitive and social and emotional skills play an important role in improving children's chances of lifetime success. Additionally, Belfield and associates, in their 2015 commissioned study on the *Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning*, asserted that SEL programs almost universally demonstrate a strong return on investment (ROI) over long periods of time. In a cost-benefit analysis of six SEL programs, it is estimated that these programs generated an average return of \$11 per \$1 invested. A very positive ROI indeed!

In summary, there is very promising evidence that social-emotional learning matters to the well-being of children and youth at school, at home, and in workplaces. To translate many of the promising social-emotional practices identified and to grow them in schools, homes, and workplaces, educators need efficient assessments and intervention programs proven effective for increasing the SEL skills of a wide range of children.

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# Which SEL skills need to be assessed and taught?

Related to the definition of SEL introduced at the outset of this paper, a competency framework referred to as the CASEL SEL Competencies (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2012) has become very influential in both the education policy and practice arenas in the United States, as well as a number of foreign countries. This framework includes five competency domains:

- **Self-Awareness**, defined as the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior,
- **Self-Management**, defined as the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations,
- **Social Awareness**, defined as the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports,
- **Relationship Skills**, defined as the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups, and
- **Responsible Decision-Making Skills**, defined as the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

These five competency domains have been empirically supported by independent researchers, in addition to Pearson authors, Frank Gresham and Stephen Elliott (Gresham & Elliott, 2017; Gresham, Elliott, Metallo, Byrd, Erickson, Wilson, & Altman, 2017). In this research, it has been documented that over 50 specific social skills involving communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, engagement, empathy, and self-control behaviors, align with the five SEL competency domains. In addition, Gresham and Elliott (2017) provided evidence that these SEL competencies and the specific social behaviors that operationalized them could all be assessed reliably *and taught effectively* to children ages 3 to 18 years of age.

## How can educators and other school professionals effectively teach SEL skills to all children?

Interestingly, most educators already teach many SEL skills daily! Some experts, however, have observed that these SEL skills are typically part of a "hidden curriculum." That is, educators often model and talk about the importance of prosocial behaviors and following school rules, but they do not explicitly and systematically teach SEL skills. However, without dedicated

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focus and explicit teaching strategies, we know that many students will not perceive or learn the desired SEL skills their teachers are encouraging. More explicit, if not different, instructional strategies are needed to be effective with all students.

So what can educators do to effectively teach social-emotional skills? First, they need to identify the SEL skills their students need to improve. Ideally, this will involve the use of a high-quality screening measure that is aligned with the SEL skills valued in their school and community. Using such a screening assessment should result in data about students' strengths and relative weaknesses. A common screening assessment that is aligned with the CASEL SEL Competency model is the *SSIS™ SEL Edition Screening and Progress Monitoring Scales* (Elliott & Gresham, 2017). This scale can be completed by a teacher for an entire classroom in 30 minutes. The results from the assessment are reported using the popular red-yellow-green traffic light model for classifying students' strengths (green) and relative weaknesses (yellow or red) in the competency domains of Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. With the SSIS SEL Screener, assessment is made easy with results being translated into practical recommendations for SEL skill areas in need of improvement.

Following a sound screening assessment of SEL skills, instruction of those skills in the SEL domains in need of attention can begin. Based on research and real-world observation, effective instruction involves modeling correct behavior, eliciting an imitative response, providing corrective feedback and reinforcement, and arranging opportunities to practice the new skills. It can involve more elements, but according to a meta-analysis of school-based social skills interventions for young children, Frey and Kaiser (2012) found that in studies with positive and statistically significant effect sizes, children learned SEL skills through observing adult models, practicing the target skill, receiving immediate feedback, and discussing their experiences after practicing the target skill. As part of the *SSIS SEL Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS CIP)*, Elliott and Gresham (2007; 2017), also reviewed the social-emotional skills intervention literature and existing school-based programs across all ages, and identified six components of effective social skills programs. These components have become the practical instructional steps of **Tell, Show, Do, Practice, Monitor Progress**, and **Generalize**. In a randomized control trial in six elementary schools funded by the U.S. Department of Education, DiPerna and colleagues (2015, 2016, 2017) provided strong evidence to support that the SSIS CIP six-step program results in students learning social and emotional skills (e.g., listens to others, takes turns in conversation, asks for help, stays calm when hit or pushed, does nice things for others) and performing these desired behaviors more frequently while concurrently reducing the frequency of many common externalizing problem behaviors, and increasing academic engagement and in some cases achievement test scores.

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## What are the barriers that educators and school mental health professionals face when selecting and implementing a school-based SEL program?

In the report *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out* (2017), Jones and colleagues identified seven common implementation challenges to SEL programs. These were: (a) ensuring sufficient staff support and training, (b) prioritizing and integrating SEL in daily practices, (c) extending SEL beyond classrooms, (d) ensuring sufficient exposure and intensity, (e) applying and transferring skills, (f) using data to inform decision-making, and (g) facilitating program ownership and buy-in. If not planned for, these seven challenges can become actual barriers. However, when effective assessments and intervention programs are available—which is the case today in the SEL arena—there are generally only three barriers to overcome in order to implement and sustain a school-based SEL program. These represent an “unholy trinity” against most education innovations and involve **implementation time, staff training, and costs**.

With the *SSIS SEL Edition Assessments and Classwide Intervention Program*, these barriers have been significantly reduced, if not eliminated. Specifically, it requires only 1.5% of the school year to fully implement the 10 core skill units of the CIP, which have been proven effective by independent researchers supported by the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education. It also requires most staff only 7 hours to learn how to use the assessments, conduct an actual SEL screening of their class, role play a CIP skill unit, and finally deliver the 3 lessons in the first of 10 skill units. As a result, teachers/interventionists must invest about 2% of an entire school year to learn how to use the SSIS SEL edition and deliver the 10 core skill units with high integrity. SSIS SEL costs approximately \$3 per student per year for all required program materials.

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# What makes the SSIS SEL Edition assessments and intervention program unique and effective?

Research and recent policy developments at the state and national level clearly support the claim that students are likely to benefit when schools offer high-quality SEL intervention programs. Fortunately, there are a few effective intervention programs from which educators can choose. Independent sources identifying a number of these effective programs are provided in the reference list at the end of this paper (see references with \*).

One of the most recent, innovative, and effective SEL programs is the *SSIS SEL Edition Assessments and Classwide Intervention Program*. This set of assessment and intervention tools was previously mentioned in the discussion regarding barriers. Specifically, it was noted that the SSIS SEL Screener and CIP are (1) a time-efficient program requiring approximately 1.5% (or 1,000 minutes) of students' and teachers' time during the entire school year to implement and another .5% (430 minutes) for teachers to be able to use the assessments and intervention units with high integrity; (2) proven effective at increasing students' core SEL skills and also improve academic engagement and achievement; and (3) priced to allow most schools to serve all students for a cost of \$3 per student. There are a few more aspects of the SSIS SEL Assessments and CIP that make it the most innovative, user-friendly program available. These include:

- All assessments—the Screening and Progress Monitoring Scales and the multi-informant Rating Forms (teachers, parents, and students)—assess the CASEL five SEL competency domains and align directly to the CIP SEL skill units. In addition, these assessments are all online and provide automated scoring and detailed reports to help guide intervention.
- The CIP intervention units all follow the 6-phase instructional model (i.e., Tell -> Show -> Do -> Practice -> Monitor Progress -> Generalize) and feature slides to facilitate engaging and consistent SEL lessons for students ages 3 to 18. The collective instructional process and digital resource materials make the CIP a S.A.F.E.R. (i.e., Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit, and Responsive) program.
- The combination of assessments with the CIP intervention provide for an efficient and aligned Multi-Tiered SEL Support System; that is, these tools are highly integrated and can be used effectively for universal intervention programs (all students), or more targeted and intensive intervention programs (for smaller groups of students in need of extra support).
- The Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program has been designated as a SElect program in the CASEL Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs for elementary students.

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In summary, the SSIS SEL edition assessments and intervention have been designed to advance students' development of both social and academic skills. Together these new resources can help all educators achieve **Effective Intervention Simplified!**

## Interested in more information on SEL programs?

The studies and reports referenced in this paper provide rich sources of additional information beyond those highlighted and summarized in this brief report. Here are the complete and accessible references for your further examination:

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