

Policy Brief from Research to Real World: Linking Policy, Practice, and Philanthropy Advances in Social Emotional Learning: Current understanding, research and practice

Imagine a pre-kindergarten classroom of 24 children. The teacher expects children to be self-reliant in putting away their backpacks and jackets and getting started with daily activities. The teacher is addressing questions from several children, who are each waiting their turn to talk with her. She remains calm, composed, respectful and compassionate as she divides her attention among all the demands. A disagreement arises between two children, but those children have been practicing self-control, perspective taking and respect, and work out their differences on their own. This classroom is infused with social-emotional skills that are the foundation for children being ready and able to learn and that help teachers have positive and effective classrooms.

What is social emotional learning and why is it important?

Social emotional learning (SEL) in classrooms is foundational to all learning. SEL competencies include self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. In early childhood, especially during the pre-school years, caregivers can help nurture these naturally developing skills.

The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL, casel.org) defines SEL as "a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness." Because SEL is a process, it looks different across the lifespan. Current research provides strong evidence that cognitive, social, and emotional learning work together to promote effective strategies for children to navigate social and learning environments and become healthy adults.

How do we effectively teach SEL skills?

Cutting edge research on SEL is discovering ways schools and other early learning settings can improve and enhance SEL skills, while also improving academic outcomes. There are a number of programs for teaching SEL skills in preschool classrooms and research shows that SEL skills can be taught by teachers in early education and care settings. The highest quality programs combine explicit lessons and activities, guidelines regarding how teachers should generalize the skills, and professional development training and support.

It takes both the content of the program (i.e., the skills and activities that are taught) and high quality implementation (i.e., how the skills are taught) to effectively teach SEL skills. Fidelity to the program, how SEL is modeled and quality of delivery are important aspects of implementation. This includes not only how many lessons are delivered, but more importantly, how the lessons and activities are delivered and the extent to which teachers incorporate SEL into the daily practice.

Research regarding the factors that promote high quality implementation is growing. These include individual characteristics of teachers such as whether they perceive an intervention positively and the extent to which they feel prepared and able to conduct the program. They also include organizational factors such as the degree of support provided by the administration and the quality of the workplace environment.

SEL skills include:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Relationship skills
- Social Awareness
- Responsible decision-making

SEL skills improve academics:

- Attitudes (motivation, commitment)
- Behaviors (attendance, study habits, learning)
- Performance (grades, test scores, subject mastery)

SEL skills help to prevent high-risk behaviors:

- Drug and alcohol use
- Violence
- Delinquency
- School non-attendance
- Depression

What YOU can do to promote Social and Emotional Learning:

What you can do to promote SEL and achieve expected outcomes of evidence-based SEL programs:

Program Administration:

Early childhood program administrators should prioritize and help teachers (and others) implement SEL practices. This includes helping teachers prioritize SEL lessons, modeling how to incorporate SEL practices in daily interactions with children, and devoting the necessary resources (i.e. financial, time, trainings, materials, etc.) to support teachers and students.

Policy/Advocacy Professionals:

A "whole" community approach is needed to maximize outcomes of evidence-based SEL programs. For SEL programs to be effective, policy makers need to develop standards and provide training. Supporting teachers and caregivers in their SEL leadership skills, includes creating a safe, caring, and participatory environment for learning. Policy makers should take a "holistic" approach to SEL programming by supporting evidence-based SEL across various sectors of society, such as libraries, social service agencies and the medical and legal professions to reach more children and families. More programs focusing on parents' SEL skills and parenting practices that promote SEL need to be developed for caregivers. When advocating and funding evidence-based interventions, ensure that there are plans and resources for training and on-going support. Coaching is gaining attention as an important professional development strategy but very few early childhood programs have the resources necessary to provide this type of intensive, personal support for teachers.

"It becomes clearer and clearer to me that the public library 'role' in early learning and parent education is an incredibly underdeveloped and untapped resource – especially considering the quality and variety of experiences we provide for early learners." – Ellen Duffy, Librarian

Practitioners and Childcare providers:

Practitioners, educators, and child care providers can advocate for training by a certified provider and ensure quality implementation of SEL programs. Childcare providers can integrate the use of an evidence-based intervention into daily practice, improving SEL outcomes by infusing SEL in all areas of work. Providers can practice SEL competencies in interactions with not only children in the classrooms, but also colleagues and

staff in the school. Seek out teachable moments when children encounter real social problems to help students practice the skills that they are learning, such as expressing feelings appropriately and self-control. While this may seem like it is taking time away from the intended lesson the long-term payoff will help students gain academic competence. Educators and child care providers can share with parents and other primary caregivers what they do to support SEL in the learning environments of children.

"SEL curricula aren't intended to be a replacement for other work, but work additively with high quality teaching." – Molly Cevasco

Parents and primary caregivers:

Parents and primary caregivers are children's first and most important teachers because they lay the foundation that supports growth in SEL skills and academic competence throughout childhood. Parents and primary caregivers can continue to support their children's SEL development by cultivating and maintaining warm, consistent and responsive relationships with their children. They can also actively seek out information about what their children's school is doing to promote SEL and what teachers are doing to infuse SEL across learning areas, such as math, science, art, music, and technology. For example, support children's use of feeling words to describe their learning experiences about safety, nutrition, the weather and problem solving in reading and math. Ask your child to tell you what he or she is learning and find opportunities to help your child practice the skills in real situations that they encounter. Reinforce your child for using these skills by noticing, validating, and acknowledging them.

Philanthropist:

Foundations and philanthropist should ensure that funding to academic programs also incorporates SEL concepts. Quality programs pay attention to both SEL skills and academic skills.

Philanthropist should also pay attention to funding professional development and continued coaching for child care providers and teachers around SEL skills. Children benefit most from teachers who understand and have continued support around their own SEL skills.

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