

# Social and Emotional Learning

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As I write this, it is in the middle of one of those weeks where the news seems to be coming at us fast and furious, with regular 'breaking news' updates on my phone about the continuing politics and terror attacks in the United Kingdom. There was also a bewildering and distressing announcement that 10 students who were admitted to a highly competitive and prestigious university had their acceptance letters rescinded after they had sent sexually explicit and racially charged memes and messages that had targeted minority groups in a private Facebook chat. Along with this chain of events was an announcement that the journal *The Future of Children* had published a special issue on social and emotional learning ([The Future of Children, 2017](#)). Perfect timing, I thought.

The term *social and emotional learning* (SEL) has been around for about the past 20 years, but there is now a renewed interest among parents, educators, health care providers, and policy makers as to how schools can better integrate SEL into classrooms in addition to traditional academic subjects. Research has demonstrated that SEL is key to important life outcomes, such as school and career success, because it fosters the ability of children to integrate thinking about their emotions and behaviors in ways that lead to positive academic and social outcomes ([Jones & Doolittle, 2017](#)).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an initiative that promotes the adoption of policies, standards, and guidelines for the incorporation of SEL in schools ([CASEL, 2017](#)). Largely due to the efforts of CASEL,

all 50 states now have SEL standards in place at the preschool level, and four states have developed such standards for kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

While there are common themes, there are a variety of conceptual frameworks which describe SEL, and thus provide implications for assessment, intervention, and evaluation. One of the more familiar frameworks is that described by [CASEL \(2017\)](#), which identifies five types of competencies related to SEL skills:

- *Self-awareness*: the ability to identify one's own emotions and values, and understand how they guide behavior;
- *Self-management*: the ability to successfully regulate one's behavior in different situations;
- *Social-awareness*: understanding social norms of behavior and being able to adopt the perspectives of and empathize with others;
- *Relationship skills*: the ability to be a good listener, cooperate with others, and resist negative social pressure; and
- *Responsible decision making*: being able to make constructive choices about behavior based on societal norms and ethical standards.

Overall, research has indicated that SEL skills are meaningful. Children who participate in evidence-based SEL programs in schools and other settings tend to have better outcomes academically and in life ([McKown, 2017](#)). Such skills are also considered to be malleable; that is, they can be taught and changed.

When it comes to the challenge of how to promote SEL, policy makers point to four specific aims where the benefits are felt to outweigh the costs: 1) adopt SEL standards in schools and other settings; 2) develop incentives for sites to implement SEL programs; 3) provide coursework and training for educators and other providers; and 4) invest in further research and development of SEL programs (McKown).

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To achieve and be successful in life, it may be just as important for children to learn social and behavioral skills as it is to learn academic and cognitive content. Regarding research and practice, we are at a crossroads in that the challenge is to further develop the evidence and incorporate these findings into our educational and healthcare systems. Educators, health care professionals, and policy makers will be key partners to ensure that there will be continued support for developing the science of SEL, and to incorporate the learning of these skills into the everyday experiences of children.

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