

YOUTH, ADVERSITY AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN LAC

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply 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. The term “Social-Emotional Learning” is generally used in education but overlaps with the skills labeled “soft skills” or “life skills” in other fields. One of the most commonly used SEL frameworks in education comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and includes five competencies with sub-competencies ranging from impulse control and goal setting to empathy and conflict resolution.

Evaluations of SEL programming for children have found significant positive impacts on academic achievement, behavior, and attitudes about others, self, and school. However, the evidence base for the effectiveness of SEL programs targeting adolescents is somewhat smaller than for programs targeting children and the evidence itself shows a smaller impact. This may be because some adolescent SEL programs are simply “aged up” versions of childhood programs that don’t address the unique neurological and social changes facing adolescents. While more research is needed, some promising SEL practices for adolescents include focusing on their mindsets and climate as well as harnessing their developmental motivations to feel respected by adults and peers, and gain status and admiration in the eyes of people whose opinions they value.¹

SEL skills closely align with the skills identified in [YouthPower Action's report](#) that increase the likelihood that youth will

get a job, keep a job, perform well, earn more, or achieve entrepreneurial success.(labeled workforce success in the diagram below).

Social-emotional learning and adversity

In LAC communities affected by violence and displacement, children are at higher risk of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, violence, and household dysfunction. Frequent or persistent ACEs can result in toxic stress, which can disrupt the natural development of the brain and increase the likelihood of negative mental and physical health outcomes including difficulty learning, focusing and developing positive relationships^{2,3}. Adolescence is also a time of intensive brain growth and restructuring that leads to greater emotional volatility, risk-seeking, and impulsivity as well as independence, identity-seeking, and social awareness.

¹ Yeager, D. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 73-94. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/44219022

² Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, et al. Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *Am J Prev Med*. 1998;14(4):245-258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8). © 1998 American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

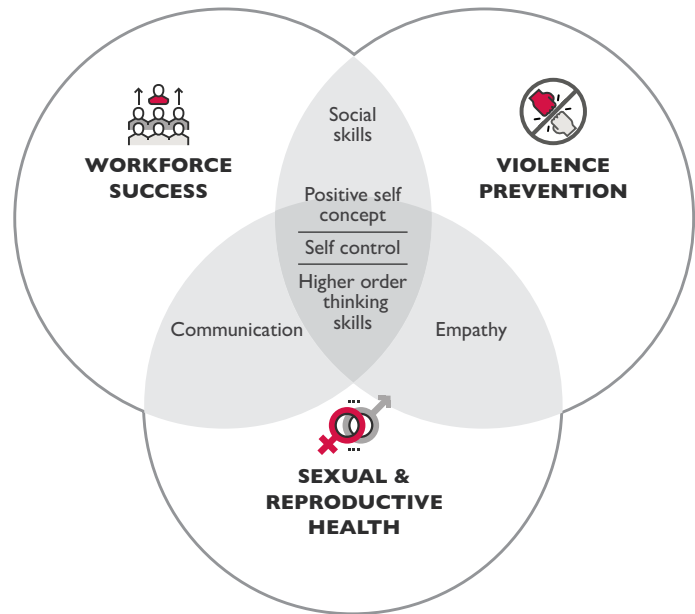
³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005/2014). Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper 3. Updated Edition. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Soft Skills for Youth Outcomes



CASEL SEL Competency Frameworks



YouthPower Action Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes

These changes can make adolescents more vulnerable to risks like substance abuse and participation in gangs but can also lead to pro-social behaviors such as a greater focus on values, community that foster motivation and creativity.⁴ Social-Emotional Learning interventions that leverage the unique social and psychological position of adolescence can not only mitigate the effects of toxic stress, but also develop the soft skills necessary to succeed in the modern workforce and lead healthy, productive and engaged lives.

⁴ See <http://actforyouth.net/adolescence/toolkit/risk.cfm> for a discussion and links to research relating to adolescent development and risky behaviors.

ADAPTING SEL PROGRAMMING TO ADOLESCENCE

SEL Interventions can both mitigate the risks and leverage the positive traits of adolescence by providing:

- Activities to help youth find purposeful roles in the community
- An environment that provides respect and dignity
- Higher-level challenging tasks
- Positive risk-taking activities
- Opportunities for autonomy, choice and decision-making
- Fairness in how rules are applied
- Opportunities to apply SEL skills in diverse and challenging contexts

Suggestion	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help youth find purpose in the community • Create opportunities to apply SEL skills across contexts • Higher level / challenging tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to understand the goals of youth. Discuss how otherwise uninteresting learning tasks support those goals. • Identify learning opportunities outside of the classroom for youth to apply newly learned skills. For example, work with youth to identify a problem within the community and develop and implement a solution or advocate for change.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for autonomy, choice and decision making. • Environment with respect and dignity • Fairness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use project-based learning to allow youth to select topics or activities that align with their interests • Create opportunities for youth to participate in decision making within the school / program through advisory committees or other mechanisms. Actively solicit and use their input. • Discuss rules and consequences openly at the beginning of the program, and ensure they are applied fairly. • Work with youth to set expectations about participation, behavior in the learning environment.

Approaches to Youth Social-Emotional Learning Interventions

Youth SEL programming can be implemented through various channels, including schools, extracurricular activities, and vocational programs. **At the foundation of all SEL programming is a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment.**

Other common features of positive youth development such as healthy relationships, youth engagement and integrating support with family, school and community also contribute to SEL and soft skills development. Common features of many SEL programs that can be easily included in workforce development programs include brief mindfulness exercises, games and activities to develop social cooperation through group work, practice applying social problem-solving techniques and personal reflection. SEL programs can also provide opportunities for adolescents to **practice basic professional skills** like timeliness, discipline, and teamwork in a low risk environment where they can be supported by adults.

SEL programs can also directly support key adults such as **educators, facilitators, and caregivers**. For example, in El Salvador FHI 360 implements a Social-Emotional Learning Workshop series to help teachers in schools affected by a high prevalence of gang violence improve their own SEL capacity, resilience and wellbeing. In Guatemala, FHI 360 is developing a preservice training that will enable secondary school teachers to incorporate SEL activities into their math lessons. In order to teach well, adults must be well themselves.



TIPS FOR SEL BEST PRACTICES IN WFD PROGRAMS

Safe, caring, supportive, and enriching learning environments:

- Activities to help youth find purposeful roles in the community
- An environment that provides respect and dignity
- Higher-level challenging tasks
- Positive risk-taking activities
- Opportunities for autonomy, choice and decision-making
- Fairness in how rules are applied
- Opportunities to apply SEL skills in diverse and challenging contexts

Meaningful relationships

- Hire staff from local community that are representative of the learner population
- Facilitate collaboration across gender, socioeconomic, ethnic, and age groups

Positive staff practices

- Teach through questioning and facilitation rather than direct instruction
- Focus on facilitator/staff wellbeing

Experiential learning

- Apply project-based learning
- Cultivate a culture where learning from mistakes and failures is highly valued

Interconnected Skills

- Teach soft skills in tandem with hard skills
- Connect soft skills to real world problems and experiences

Promote integration of learning contexts

- Reinforce skills in the home, school and workplace
- Include families and employers in program design and implementation



TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING

Although SEL can be integrated into a variety of activities by teachers and practitioners with minimal training, more advanced psychosocial support should only be conducted by professionals.

Anyone who works with children and youth should understand how to identify the signs of psychological issues that need professional support and be familiar with available referral mechanisms. However, in contexts where participants in WFD programs are likely to have experienced trauma, safe and supportive learning spaces become even more crucial.

Facilitators should:

- Avoid triggers like yelling or violent games
- Use culturally appropriate positive touch such as handshakes or hugs
- Maintain routines in the aftermath of a traumatic event
- Share age-appropriate information about traumatic events
- Provide flexibility to participants for whom activities or content trigger a traumatic response, while also encouraging them to challenge their comfort zones
- Foster safe inclusion for participants who have experienced trauma, including those with a history of gang involvement or substance abuse

Resources for Understanding SEL

- [Harvard EASEL SEL Framework Comparison](#) – An interactive tool to examine connections, skills, and focuses of SEL skill frameworks from various projects and organizations.
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\) Website](#) – Wide-ranging resources on SEL approaches, implementation, impact, and evidence.
- [Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes](#)—identifies a key set of soft skills and life skills for workforce development, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and preventing violent behaviors.

Resources for Including SEL in Program Design

- [Developmental Relationships Framework](#) – A study of five elements that make relationships powerful in young people's lives, with 20 specific actions for adults interacting with youth.

- [Child Mind Institute Trauma Response Guides](#) – A collection of multilingual resources to aid parents, educators, and other adults in talking to children and adolescents about potentially traumatic events and identifying those who might benefit from more focused professional attention.
- [Preparing Youth to Thrive](#) – Stories, tools, and resources on promising practices for social-emotional learning for youth, including a SEL Field Guide for educators.
- [Guiding Principles for Building Soft and Life Skills Among Adolescents and Young Adults](#)—identifies six evidence-based principles to help foster soft skills and life skills.

Resources for Soft Skills Measurement

Soft skills measurement is still an emerging area of research. Many excellent tools measure soft skills and new ones are being developed, however, the field currently exhibits some weaknesses and limitations that obstruct their usefulness for program monitoring and evaluation. Specific challenges include developmental appropriateness for different age groups,



CASE STUDY: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

With hundreds of millions of people affected by prolonged disabling emotional distress, particularly in regions of conflict and crisis, there is a huge deficit in access to professional mental health care. The World Health Organization's cognitive behavioral therapy programs address this gap by using psychological interventions that can be delivered by non-mental health specialists such as teachers, volunteers and community members who receive adequate training and supervision. In Honduras, Problem Management PM+ worked through local health facilities to identify community members in need of mental health services and connect them with volunteers trained to facilitate CBT. PM+ sessions, delivered over five weeks, empower participants to self-manage their distress for sustainable solutions and has proven to be effective in diminishing depression and anxiety and improving people's functioning and achieving self-selected, culturally relevant outcomes. Pilot testing of EASE, which consists of group sessions for both youth and caregivers using evidence-based cognitive behavioral strategies, has shown promising initial results. Both interventions use a scalable, manualized, and evidence-based approach to offering transdiagnostic services to address a range of psychological issues and contexts.

- [Project Management Plus \(PM+\) Manual](#) – Multilingual manual for practitioners implementing PM+
- [PM+ community of practice](#) – Virtual community of practice for practitioners implementing PM+
- [Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions](#) – Detailed information on the development and progress of the Early Adolescent Skills for Emotion intervention.



CASE STUDY: Mindfulness

Breathe International implements SEL programming based on mindfulness, a mental training and personal development practice proven to benefit mental health that fosters kind and caring self-observation to deepen individuals' presence and awareness. In Colombia, Breathe provides mindfulness training for students, teachers, parents, and communities affected by cycles of violence and poverty. Their programming focuses first on teachers as both beneficiaries and facilitators, incorporating mindfulness practice and psychoeducation for youth to build understanding of their own mental processes and gain agency over their emotion regulation. All activities are grounded in offering safety in trusting in oneself and others while developing agency and resilience.

- [Breathe International](#) – More information about mindfulness practices, evidence, and Breathe's work in various countries.

measuring change over time, prevalence of self-report measures, evidence of reliability and validity. YouthPower Action carried out a review, *Measuring Soft and Life Skills in International Development Programs: A Review and Inventory of Tools* that reviews the state of the field of soft skills measurement and provides an inventory of tools with detailed information and ratings of more than 70 instruments and recommendations for improving soft skills measurement.

Tools for Implementing SEL Curriculum and Activities

- [INEE Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning Resource Collection](#) – A library of guides, reports, and training materials for educators in crisis and conflict contexts from the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies.

- [Safe Healing and Learning Spaces Toolkit](#) – Comprehensive materials for IRC's SEL in conflict and crisis program, including training materials and lesson plans for child protection and education practitioners.
- [Brain Games](#) – A set of simple games packaged for explicit SEL objectives that can be adapted for any level and included as an extra component in a variety of youth activities.
- [Mindfulness Exercises](#) – A collection of video tutorials on basic mindfulness exercises from IRC that can be included as an extra component in a variety of youth activities

YouthPower Action

YouthPower Action supports and advances USAID's Youth in Development Policy through evidence-based positive youth development programming across all sectors and country contexts by providing technical assistance to USAID Missions and operating units. YouthPower Action's activities increase youth engagement and youth voice to strengthen USAID's positive youth development programming. YouthPower Action supports USAID missions and operating units through a flexible buy-in mechanism.

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