



# **Understanding social emotional learning for adolescents:**

**A guide for caregivers & youth-  
supporting professionals**



Utah Department of  
**Health & Human**  
Services

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## Basics of social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the lifelong journey to better social and emotional skills, such as handling emotions and building relationships. There are three main forms of SEL:

### Personally responsible SEL

Teaches skills that help youth succeed, take responsibility, and improve their well-being.



### Participatory SEL

Helps youth succeed, build relationships, and build a strong community.

### Transformative SEL (TSEL)

This level covers what is learned in the last two levels. Plus, TSEL explores how to create a space for everyone to have the chance to succeed.



Adapted from *Transformative SEL* [9]

Overall in SEL, it is vital to understand both the language used and topics covered. Most SEL programs use the first two forms. Keep in mind that the terms used and strategies to apply SEL may change over time to better meet people's needs. Many definitions exist, but they often share common ideas or themes. For instance, most SEL programs commonly consider the five SEL competencies (or skills) from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

**Self-awareness**

**Self-management**

**Social awareness**

**Relational skills**

**Responsible decision-making**

## The lasting benefits of SEL

Children learn to handle many new social and emotional changes during adolescence, a stage of development that spans the ages of 10-19. The social and emotional skills they have to manage emotions and build relationships continue to improve during this time. SEL supports this growth by helping them recognize their strengths, celebrating and building on successes, and encouraging a growth mindset. Although it is normal for youth to seek being on their own, social and emotional support from adults (or co-regulation) continues to be needed. Here are benefits that young people have when adults stay involved with SEL (based on research):

1. Improved health outcomes.
2. Better classroom behavior and doing well in school.
3. Improved ability to manage their emotions, such as stress and depression.
4. Improved view about themselves, others, and school.
5. Better rates of youth that graduate from high school.

Source: [University of Minnesota](#)

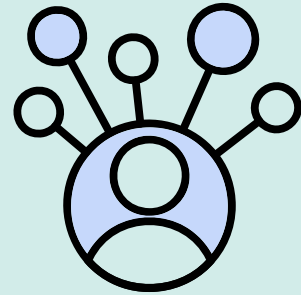


SEL also helps to reduce drug and substance use, the rate of youth missing school a lot, bullying and other issues with behaviors, and pregnancy in teens. Plus, SEL can help youth build good relationships with others that can help them through struggles such as mental health issues, feeling alone, and hard times that led to trauma. Even adults can have some of these benefits if they engage in SEL! When young people and adults have the needed SEL knowledge and skills, both they and their communities can enjoy better health and safety.

## How does the SEL process work?

01

Find skills that are strengths and areas to work on

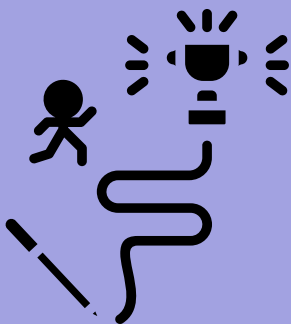
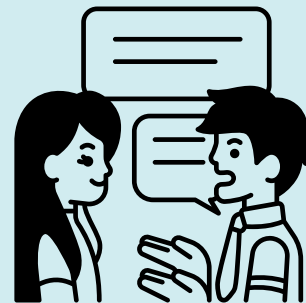


Teach the social and emotional skill(s)

02

03

Model the skill(s) and share examples



Reinforce the skill often

04

## Choose a skill: Where to start?

There are many ways for youth to learn the social and emotional skills that are needed to be successful in school, work, and life. First, identify any skills that are strengths or ones they are already good at. Then, identify any skills they could get better at. These skills can be seen by watching behaviors or by using a tool that measures SEL skills. Adults need to spend time thinking about their skills too. Better skills will help you along the way. Here are some possible skills to focus on:

Knowing yourself	Not giving up
Self-control	Leadership
Staying calm	Doing things on your own
Coping	Paying attention
Empathy	Critical thinking
Teamwork	Goal setting
Connecting with others	Managing time
Believing in yourself	Planning for success
Communication skills	Problem solving
Solving issues	Focus
Getting along with others	Drive
Understanding how others' feel	Motivation
Accepting others	Being responsible
Self-confidence	Helping others
Making good choices	Adapting to change

Adapted from the [University of Minnesota's SEL Toolkit](#)

Results from a skill test can show where to start. The results can also help you set goals to support what students are learning. Set a goal with the youth's input. The goal should not be too easy or hard. Then, make a plan to measure growth in skills after teaching starts. Be mindful that "success" for each skill can differ based on cultural or personal values and beliefs. Help youth to decide on their view of success. Track the progress too and praise any growth!



## Advice to teach social and emotional skills

Once a skill has been identified, start to teach. Be mindful that students have many ways of learning. Also, SEL can be learned through various methods, so it's key to think about how to make good learning spaces. CASEL offers advice through three broad practices to build the ideal space needed to practice social and emotional skills.

Three key practices	Example
Provide a <b>respectful welcome</b> . Start the day with an activity that makes all youth feel welcome and ties to the work ahead.	Work together to make program routines or rituals to express emotions. Think about having daily check-in questions.
Apply <b>engaging strategies</b> that offer a chance for everyone to interact with others.	Provide time for youth to open up about themselves and get to know each other. Use team building time or goal setting activities to help them connect with each other.
End with a <b>closing</b> to help everyone reflect and check that they understand the info.	At the end of class, ask all youth to share one word that reflects their thoughts or feelings.

For activities of each practice:  [Three signature practices playbook](#)

As well as these best practices, the adult that leads the learning efforts can adopt these teaching practices that aid SEL:

### SEL teaching practices

Help youth  
take charge

Use discipline  
that adds  
youth voice

Show warmth  
& help

Review how to  
speak with  
respectful

Set clear rules

Teach in a way  
that works for  
all youth.

Learn  
together

Give time for  
self-reflection

*Adapted from Best practices in social emotional learning [2]*

After the skill has been taught, youth need to be able to see adults effectively model the social emotional skill. This helps youth view the value and importance of the skill. Modeling gives a helpful example of how to use the skill in real-life situations. Finally, reinforce the skill with practice. Adults may need to repeat info or redo lessons. This is fine because it helps the skill grow and stay strong over time. Bring creativity to how you teach or adapt tools. Do not forget to have fun along the way! Use this time to connect with your teen. The relationship matters a lot. They value the opinions and knowledge of adults that they respect.







# Ways to teach social and emotional skills

Click on the titles to learn more

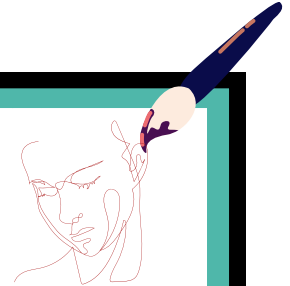
**2.**

## Nature-based education

Activity to try:  
[Poet tree](#)



**1. Art**



Activity to try:  
[Lean on us](#)

**3.**

## Play and game-based learning

Activity to try:  
[Capture the flag](#)

**4.**

## Project-based learning

Activity to try:  
[Invent a sport](#)

**5. STEM activities**

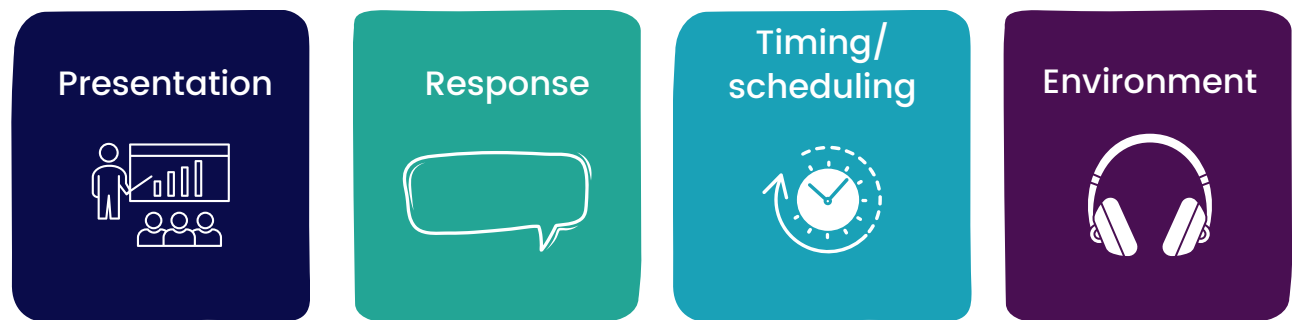


Activity to try:  
[Bottle rockets](#)

## Accommodations for learning needs

Accommodations are changes that help make sure all students are able to learn, including those who have intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD), mental health needs, or other support needs. There are four groups of changes:

- **Presentation:** Change the way info is presented by using text with a larger font size, audio clips, or visuals.
- **Response:** Change the way someone is required to respond, such as through written text, verbal response, or images.
- **Timing or scheduling:** Change the time used. Give youth extra time on homework or tasks. There will be times where a topic can be reviewed in detail while briefly other times.
- **Environment:** Adjust the space and be mindful of noise levels and lighting. Have fidget toys or sensory tools accessible.



Parents and caregivers will need to consider and apply these same types of changes when they teach at home. Students with IDD may need more support to build up social and emotional skills. It is important to connect with school leaders, including teachers, about each student's needs. Students may need an Individual Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan. Both plans outline a student's specific needs; what accommodations they need for learning; and the SEL goals in their education. Plans can be made to help youth transition into adulthood too (called a transition IEP). The staff at a student's school can help parents schedule an assessment to determine which option would be a better fit for their student.



### Explore the learning needs of youth with disabilities.

- [Seven principles for success](#)
- [Increasing equity in the classroom for youth with IDD](#)
- [The difference between IEPs and 504 plans](#)



Research on SEL for people with disabilities is currently limited. It can be hard to find tools or programs that best meet their needs. Reach out to the SEL program creators for advice and ideas on how to adapt activities for different learners. School staff benefit from asking parents for insight on their child's strengths and what learning strategies have worked well in the past. Keep in mind that some people may benefit from changes to what is taught or expected to learn.

## Key points

1. Reflect on the person's needs (assistive devices, space, alarms to manage time, time to move, tools for sensory needs like fidget toys or headphones that cancel noise, etc.). Make a plan for each setting the youth will find themselves in.
2. Slow down when teaching and use moments of silence to allow time for youth to process the info. Youth can focus more when a break is provided often.
3. Repeat and vary how you present the info.
5. Pause and directly ask questions to check that they understand.
6. Simplify info to avoid confusing learners.
7. Have 1-on-1 time with teens. Use this to build a bond with them. This can help them share their feelings when trust is made. They are more likely to ask for help.
8. Work together to set rules and limits. Refer back to these often to hold each other accountable.
9. Seek out social scripts, a guide of things to say or do in social situations. Find one that is short and simple. Give them this tool to practice before they face stress.
10. Help youth name caring adults who could help them. Guide them to pick the right kind of adults. What traits should they have?

## Build an SEL team


Young people get social emotional learning support in different ways—though parents or caregivers are the main teacher. Parents, schools, and local programs must chat and work together to guide young people. Classrooms and schools can help young people foster social and emotional skills and build a better bond with peers, teachers, and family members. As of 2022, all 50 states have adopted pre-K SEL competencies while only 27 states have adopted them for K-12[1]. What skills does the local school teach? What knowledge gaps need to be filled with other learning spaces?

Local groups are helpful too because they give the whole family more opportunities to learn SEL. Consider after school programs or family centers for support. Often, events are hosted that create a space for family members to connect and learn about resources. Parents do not have to teach SEL alone; it is fine to ask for backup. This can help when feeling stuck or unsure what to do next to improve a skill.

Adults should seek SEL programs that support the SEL goals they are working on. Schools and youth groups must consider SEL curricula that meet the needs of their community, and consider their policies. The 2024 edition of the [CASEL program guide](#) provides a broad list of evidence-based SEL programs which can be filtered to show only those relevant to the key setting in which they will be used. There are even options that can be used at home by parents!



Read more on SEL in schools:

 [Utah State Board of Education \(USBE\) SEL document](#)

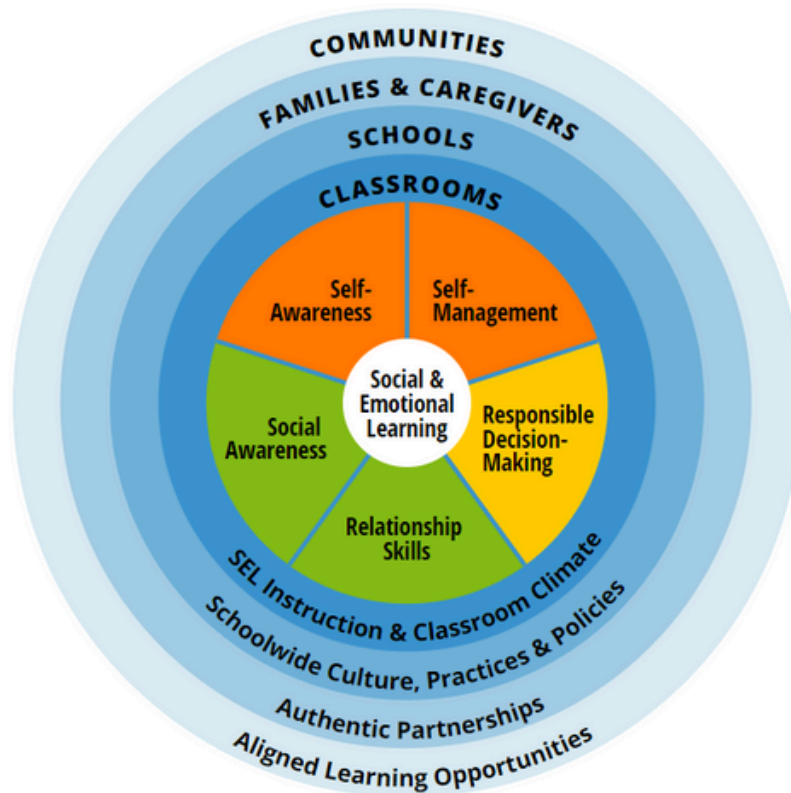
Learn more with videos:

[SEL Collection | PBS](#)

- SEL at Home
- SEL for Teachers
- and more!



Image from *What is the CASEL Framework?*



## Reflection questions on team work

Adults can get more done to help youth when they work as a team to help them. Youth should be able to share their thoughts in the SEL process too. They are part of the team too! The following questions can help adults reflect on how to help each other to better support adolescent SEL:

1. How are the youth, family, and professionals partnering to pick an SEL framework and a measuring tool that fits their developmental level?
2. A bias can affect how success is defined. What biases might you or others have? How will those biases be addressed?
3. How can the youth's strengths in social and emotional skills be used?
4. What is the plan for the adults involved in SEL to reflect on and improve their own social and emotional skills? What help will they need?

## Adult SEL resources and career growth



“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better,  
do better.”  
-Maya Angelou

The focus on skill growth should never stop, no matter how young or old. SEL can have a major effect on all lives with effort. Adults need opportunities to learn how to effectively explain and model SEL to youth. They also need to learn how to create safe spaces where learning and growth can thrive. In simple terms, what do youth need from adults during this time? Adults can boost their skills to teach SEL with learning and practice. This can include seminars, training sessions, and webinars, made to improve their SEL skills. Learn about various topics, including mindfulness and ways to handle stress, empathy, strategies that pair well with SEL [such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (or PBIS)], cultural awareness, trauma-informed practices, and how to engage with families and the community. Over time, youth may come to see you as a trusted adult!

## Resources for caregivers

Tool/Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>EveryDay Strong resilience</u></a>	A handbook to learn about emotional health and behavior.
<a href="#"><u>Harmony at Home</u></a>	SEL tools and resources to help students that are in Pre-K to 6th grade.
<a href="#"><u>Live On</u></a>	A course to give people the tools to comfort someone who has thoughts of suicide. Free in both English and Spanish.
<a href="#"><u>Talk to Tweens</u></a>	A free program to help a teens' emotional wellbeing.
<a href="#"><u>We Think Twice</u></a>	A page to help teens live their best lives. It gives tips and tools to make good decisions, set goals, be a leader, and more.





## Resources for professionals

Tool/Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>An introduction to social and emotional learning</u></a>	Online course to learn the basics of SEL and how to model SEL with young people.
<a href="#"><u>Games for SEL</u></a>	A guide with games to practice social and emotional skills.
<a href="#"><u>Guides for how to incorporate co-regulation with older youth in foster care</u></a>	Guides for parents and experts who work with older youth in foster care. Adults can learn to engage with and support youth.
<a href="#"><u>Healthy Youth Development through Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation</u></a>	Teens need to be able to manage their emotions on their own and with the help of others. Learn how adults can use co-regulation to help.
<a href="#"><u>Readiness inventory</u></a>	A tool to evaluate a program's SEL strengths and areas for growth. Use the survey to learn how to improve an SEL program among four areas.
<a href="#"><u>Youth connectedness toolkit</u></a>	A toolkit to help youth feel connected at home, school, and other places.



## Resources for professionals

Tool/Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Three SEL signature practices playbook</u></a>	Learn about the three researched tips that help both build and practice SEL.
<a href="#"><u>CASEL program guides</u></a>	A guide for school staff to help pick goals and select an evidence-based SEL program that meets community needs.
<a href="#"><u>Mental health in rural communities toolkit</u></a>	Well-tested models with data and research for rural communities running mental health programs.
<a href="#"><u>Social and emotional learning toolkit</u></a>	A toolkit to support staff and youth in SEL through activities, templates, and tools.
<a href="#"><u>Teen Outreach Program</u></a>	A program that helps teens through education to build social-emotional skills, build good self-esteem, and make an impact in the community.



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