

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Intentional Practices to Support Social & Emotional Learning

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives. This brief was updated in 2017 and is supported by a free online resource, [*Social and Emotional Learning in Practice: A Toolkit of Practical Strategies and Resources*](#).

INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional skills are important tools for navigating life (Larson & Tran, 2014). They are also powerful predictors of other important youth outcomes such as academic achievement and work readiness (Durlak et al., 2011). Developing social and emotional competence can have an exponential effect on youth throughout their lives. Therefore, it is critical that youth programs claiming social and emotional outcomes become intentional about the strategies they practice and the growth that youth experience.

Practitioners play an influential role in social and emotional learning of the young people they work with, but it does not happen by accident. The purpose of this brief is to highlight strategies that practitioners can use to increase their intentionality around young people's ways of being social and emotional learners. These Ways of Being include all of the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that exist in the ways we deal with feelings, relationships and getting things done. The [Ways of Being Model](#) is fully described in a previous brief in this series (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2017). The model is a tool for practitioners, youth, and families to deepen their understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL).

Intentional support of SEL is highly aligned with good youth development practices, but quality youth work alone does not sufficiently guide practitioners who want to focus on SEL (Shernoff, 2013). Intentionality is about both creating environments and designing experiences in ways that foster SEL. Increasing intentional practices to support SEL can be an important part of achieving SEL youth outcomes and have a long-term impact on youth's social and emotional competence. Improving the quality of the youth development process is highly compatible with, but distinct from, intentionally improving the focus on SEL outcomes. Improvements in both areas increase the likelihood that a youth's participation in expanded learning opportunities will have impact on their lives. This brief will describe specific strategies that compliment a variety of program structures, curriculum choices, and SEL frameworks, as well as point to additional resources for practitioners who want to deepen their expertise in SEL.

DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRACTICE

The role of the youth practitioner is central to the social and emotional learning process and outcome. As practitioners think about improving their intentional focus on SEL outcomes, it is important to remember that social and emotional skills and attitudes are both *taught* and *caught*. While we can design experiences that will *teach* youth specific language and skills, these youth are also *catching* social and emotional skills through the everyday experiences in a program. It's not only what we say or teach that matters, but also how we act and what we do to create experiences and environments where youth *catch* social and emotional skills. It is possible, and necessary, to be intentional about the ways that social and emotional skills are both *taught* and *caught* in your program.

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM READINESS INVENTORY

This tool is designed to help programs evaluate how well their current practices support social and emotional learning. The inventory will help identify program practice strengths as well as areas for improvement.

TABLE 1: Social and Emotional Learning Program Readiness Inventory	Your Intentionality Profile		
	NO	SOMETIMES	YES
EQUIPPING STAFF			
Do we comfortably talk about the components of social and emotional learning and why it matters?			
Can we identify the specific SEL skills our program is designed to support?			
Do we spend time exploring our own social and emotional skills as staff?			
Are we explicit about how the cultural experiences of staff and youth influence social and emotional learning?			
CREATING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT			
Do we regularly have feedback conversations with youth about their social and emotional skills?			
Do we communicate with parents about youth's social and emotional skill growth?			
Do we integrate SEL opportunities into our routines and behavior expectations?			
Do we integrate SEL into our conflict resolution and behavior management practices?			
DESIGNING IMPACTFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE			
Do we have a planned set of activities that progressively challenge youth to build social and emotional skills?			
Do we incorporate active opportunities for youth to engage SEL?			
Do we incorporate opportunities for youth to reflect on their social and emotional learning?			
Do we integrate youth's cultural values around SEL into our program design?			
USING DATA FOR IMPROVEMENT			
Do we have tools and strategies in place to track youth's progress in social and emotional skill development?			
Do we use data to improve our social and emotional learning practices?			
Do we incorporate SEL-related data into our dashboard and data review processes?			
Do we have formal tools to measure social and emotional learning outcomes in our program?			

Once you have completed the inventory, take stock of your program's relative strengths. Do your yes items fall primarily into one of the four strategies or are they spread throughout the inventory? What areas are you engaged in sometimes that with increased intentionality could become consistent practices? For your no items, are these ideas brand new or are they areas you already know need improvement? While all four strategies do not need to develop sequentially within your program, all areas are important components of programs that are intentionally supporting social and emotional

learning in youth. To use this inventory to improve your intentionality, devote some reflective planning time to the following two steps:

1. **Identify your program's relative area of strength.** Make a list of all of the environmental actions and programmatic elements that are currently in place to support intentional practice in this area. These strategies are part of your SEL toolbox that you can use as a foundation to build additional strategies into your program.
2. **Identify one of the four areas to target for improving your intentionality in practice.** Read through the rest of this brief and mark strategies that might help you improve your program practices in this area. Make a list of these strategies, and identify one to focus on first.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES

The good news is that programs do not need to create or adopt a new comprehensive SEL curriculum. Research shows that the integration of specific strategies and practices are likely more effective than trying to implement a new curriculum (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010). Thus, if you want to improve the intentionality of SEL efforts and equip youth with social and emotional skills, we recommend you incorporate new strategies into your existing program design.

Equipping Staff

Expertise in SEL begins with a foundation in good youth development practices, and grows with a deeper understanding of the SEL domain and learning process. Effective staff need to be fluent in the concepts and language of social and emotional learning.

- **Build understanding and fluency.** Use a tool like the Ways of Being Model for social and emotional learning. Engaging staff in conversations about Ways of Being, as a way to conceptualize social and emotional skills, is one way to help staff become more explicit in how they talk about SEL with youth. Try spending a few moments in a SEL focused conversation over the course of several staff meetings. Invite staff to identify parts of your program that connect to SEL areas like ways of feeling, ways of relating, and ways of doing. Ask them to consider where natural opportunities for SEL currently exist or to think about what SEL skills youth in your program are using or need to develop.
- **Support social and emotional learning in practitioners.** Social and emotional skills are *taught* and *caught*—from examples of adults as role models and mentors. As you make the transition to becoming more intentional about SEL, take time to practice social and emotional skills within your staff team and attend to SEL dimensions in your personal lives. Try setting aside a week to focus on emotional awareness. Create an opportunity for staff to share their experiences of being focused on emotions and how their own awareness might impact interactions with youth. Practice having conversations about social and emotional skills with staff first. Use real life examples or role-play in order to become comfortable having similar conversations with youth.
- **Develop a culture of coaching.** If social and emotional skills are *caught* and often learned through youths' own experiences, what role can practitioners play in supporting and teaching social and emotional skills? Youth need to be the active agent of change in social and emotional learning; adults cannot force it. However, staff can act as social and emotional coaches by providing support, encouragement, and guidance as youth navigate social and emotional terrain (Rusk et al., 2013). Experienced coaches understand that negative experiences and mistakes are opportunities for growth and relationship building. Staff who view themselves as social and emotional coaches will become careful observers of youth's social and emotional skills and

experiences and offer feedback and thoughtful learning experiences to foster growth. As a staff team, spend time collaborating on challenging situations that arise with youth in your program. Invite staff to share specific examples, and take time to discuss how a “practitioner-as-coach” might respond to similar situations that come up in the future.

- **Practice giving effective feedback.** Effective feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning (Hattie, 2008). For practitioners who work with youth in out-of-school settings, giving useful feedback is a critical skill to develop. Educator Grant Wiggins (2012) simply defines feedback as “information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal.” Practitioners intent on supporting social and emotional learning should develop the practice of giving frequent and effective feedback. To do so, it is important to get clear on what feedback is, and what it is not. It is not advice about what to do; rather, it is concrete information shared with the purpose of helping another evaluate their progress towards a goal (see sidebar).

Creating the Learning Environment

The learning environment and culture of your program plays an important part in social and emotional learning. Social and emotional skills are best developed within a culture that values ways of feeling, ways of relating, and ways of doing. Staff are responsible for cultivating a learning environment in which youth voices are expected and respected (Rusk et al., 2013). Staff can influence the culture of their program by paying attention to the ways that routines, behavior expectations, and conflict resolution processes support social and emotional learning.

- **Spend time developing and using consistent routines.** The ways that youth enter your building, transition from one activity to another, or leave at the end of the day provide multiple opportunities to practice social and emotional skills. A lack of routine can result in confusion and frustration, and makes it difficult for youth to have positive experiences using basic social and emotional skills. However, consistent and predictable routines support SEL by creating supportive and simple moments to practice developing skills. One after school program took advantage of an opportunity for SEL in their check-in process. When youth arrived at the center they hung their coats and backpacks on a designated hook, then recorded their attendance on a clipboard by circling the face that best matched how they felt about their day. They could choose from 4 options: a smiling face, a half smile/half frown, a frown, or a blank face that they drew in

FEEDBACK VS. ADVICE

“When you got fouled during the pick-up game yesterday, I saw that you took a break to get a drink and cool off for a minute. When you came back to the game you seemed ready to keep playing.” (feedback)

“When you got fouled during the pick-up game yesterday, I saw that you shoved Mario and walked away. Mario started yelling and the game fell apart. (feedback)

“When you get mad during the pick-up game, you can’t just push people around. Your behavior yesterday ruined the game for everyone. Next time you really need to figure out how to control your temper.” (advice)

MHA Labs, creators of a 21st Century Skills framework, suggests that timely feedback is the cornerstone to skill-building (MHA Labs, 2014) . For practitioners just beginning to experiment with giving intentional feedback, MHA Labs suggests that you start with a form of feedback called strengths-based storytelling. Starting with strengths gives youth information about how they are using important social and emotional skills in a specific context, and helps youth identify which skills they can quickly draw on to solve problems and meet goals. While strengths-based feedback is a great place to start, youth also need timely feedback in order to build skills that they may be lacking. The fear of being negative or hurting a youth’s feelings often keeps practitioners from offering this type of important feedback. MHA Labs developed several tools to help practitioners plan skill-building feedback that is developmental and avoids judgmental language. It incorporates Wiggins’ (2012) principles of effective feedback. For more resources on skill-building feedback, see www.mhalabs.org

themselves. They also had the option to just put a check by their name to indicate that they did not want to share their feelings that day. By including this type of check-in at the attendance notebook, youth were given a brief moment to pause and think about their feelings every day. The routine created a practice opportunity that otherwise would probably not exist on a daily basis in the program.

- **Develop positive behavior expectations.** Positive behavioral expectations set the tone for how youth are expected to interact with each other, adults, and the environment. Positive behavior expectations and supportive practices include creating common expectations for all youth, teaching the skills needed to meet expectations, acknowledging behavior that meets the expectations, and setting clear consequences for behavior that does not meet expectations. (McKevitt, Dempsey, Ternus, & Shriver, 2012). This approach to behavior is an alternative to punitive methods that often rely on exclusionary practices and leave little room for skill development, practice, and improvement. Programs that implement positive behavior expectations and practices are more likely to have better SEL outcomes for youth (McKevitt et al., 2012). One out-of-school time program implemented positive behavior practices by setting three clear expectations for their middle school youth: Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible, referred to as the 3Bs. The program staff recognized the importance of clearly defining what these phrases looked like and sounded like in action. They took action to design a series of learning experiences to teach the social and emotional skills that the youth would need in order to meet the expectations of safety, respect, and responsibility. However, the power of the behavior expectations remained even after the active instruction was over. Every time the behavior expectations were mentioned youth had an opportunity to remember the skills they learned. After a few weeks of the new expectations, staff often overheard youth reminding their peers of the 3Bs. Youth had numerous opportunities to practice the skills because the expectation that everyone would follow the 3Bs existed throughout the entire program time. Finally, staff had frequent opportunities to give youth skills-based feedback when they succeeded in meeting the behavior expectations or when consequences were imposed for not meeting the expectation.

Designing Impactful Learning Experiences

The evidence is compelling—practitioners can be intentional about social emotional learning in their programs, with great benefit to youth. Programs that focus on specific skill development using *sequenced* and *active* learning strategies and *focused* and *explicit* skill content are consistently successful in promoting social emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010). It is worth noting that these principles are also highly effective in promoting SEL expertise in adults (Humphrey, 2013). Durlak et al (2011) characterized effective SEL programs as ones that incorporate these SAFE features to their program activities—*Sequenced*, *Active*, *Focused*, and *Explicit*. To this list, we also add *Reflection* as an important characteristic of social and emotional learning cycles.

- **SEQUENCED** learning experiences involve a series of steps designed to help youth reach a higher level of mastery. Practitioners can break down skills into smaller learning steps and opportunities to connect learning to real life situations. While published curriculum may be available, it is not essential. For example, taking the time to think through the smaller skills that are needed to effectively resolve conflict, and teaching those skills first reflects a sequenced learning experience. Practitioners can also create simple planning tools like a scope and sequence (what learning goals are planned, activities that will support them and when will they happen) in order to guide a learning sequence that builds and connects social emotional skills.

- Youth are **ACTIVE** by nature. They cannot be expected to grow in their capacity for social and emotional maturity through passive learning. Simply hearing, reading, or talking about skills such as empathy or self-control is not effective. Experienced youth workers know that youth need to get hands-on with opportunities to practice skills and receive relevant feedback. Creating learning experiences that allow youth to interact, role play, and create ensures that youth remain engaged.
- **FOCUSED** learning requires time, resources, and a plan. While it may be tempting to rely on the casual, relational “teachable moment,” strong evidence indicates that devoting time, resources, and planning to social emotional skill development is the most effective way to support youth. Social and emotional learning happens on purpose. Programs and practitioners who are intentional about SEL commit specific program time activities to skill development and practice.
- Being **EXPLICIT** means getting clear about what the goals are. If it’s a goal that youth develop perseverance, then everyone—young people, youth workers, and parents, should know it. If practitioners are designing activities to support the development of perseverance, youth need be able to recognize it and talk about it. Getting clear on what is supposed to be learned allows practitioners and youth to be co-collaborators in the ongoing process of social and emotional learning.
- Integrating **REFLECTION** activities as part of the learning process helps youth internalize social and emotional skills. The purpose of reflection is to help youth evaluate what they have just experienced, consider their feelings about the experience, and connect what they are learning to their lives. Specifically, practitioners can support transformative learning by prompting youth to get specific about how their experience relates to their ways of dealing with feelings, navigating relationships, and getting things done. Much of the effort put into designing social and emotional learning experiences is wasted if youth don’t have the opportunity to process their experiences through reflection.

Using Data for Improvement

In an era of accountability and limited resources for youth development, data is commonly used to make high stakes decisions about funding. Practitioners feel the pressure to find data anywhere in their program that demonstrates the

REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

If you only have a few minutes:

1. Ask participants: What did you like best about this activity? What did you like least?
2. Have youth stand in a circle. Ask a reflective question like, Who is someone in the group that you learned something cool about today? Or, What is one thing you learned today? Hold the end of the ball of string. Hand the ball to the first person to answer the question. That person holds on to the string and then tosses the ball to the next person to answer the question. When everyone has answered, note how interconnected everyone is, that everyone’s learning impacts everyone else (ways of relating).
3. As participants, What is one thing you practiced today that you think might help you get more done at school (or home, or other setting)? Share an example of how this skill might be useful outside of our program (ways of doing).

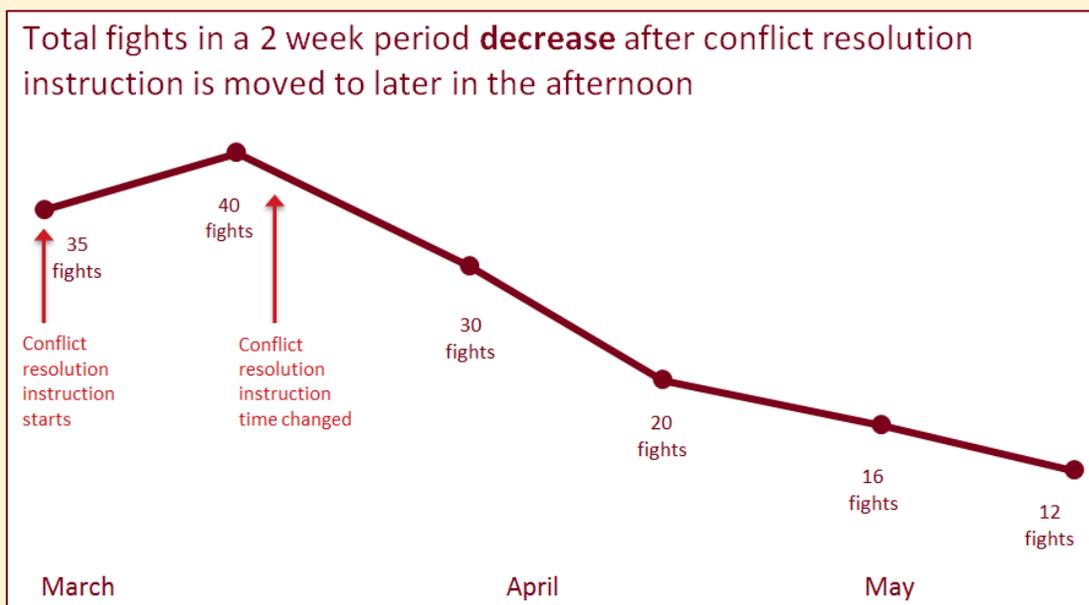
If you have a little more time:

1. Emotional Go-Around. Have youth show with a word, their body, or a facial expression how they feel right now. Let participants show their feeling one at a time, and then explain their move for the group (ways of feeling).
2. This is How It Happened Skit. Have youth work in small groups to create a short skit that portrays what they experienced in the preceding activity. Allow 10-15 minutes of planning time and 5 minutes for each group to perform (ways of relating).
3. Be The Leader. In small groups, invite youth to recreate the experience they just had for a group of younger kids. Each group should identify a learning goal, a learning activity, and a plan for assessing if the participants learned about the goal. Have groups share their activity plans with the whole group. If youth are going to actually implement these plans, give them additional time to revise their plans and add lesson components like a time management plan or needed resources (ways of doing).

effectiveness of their work, and data that point to areas for improvement too often gets set aside. It can feel like data is only a stressor that takes away from the important task of working with youth. However, data is a critical tool that increases intentionality about social and emotional learning, so that youth experience meaningful growth and positive change. Using data for improvement is like using a compass for navigation—it is the tool that ensures you keep heading north, and if you veer off track, it lets you know how to get back on the right road. In the same way, gathering data for program improvement is most beneficial when it is integrated into an ongoing process for reflection and improvement. When used in this way, data fosters creativity and continuous improvement, which has a direct impact on outcomes for youth. Meaningful measurement is not only about proving that your program works, but also about improving the work that you do.

USING DATA FOR IMPROVEMENT: A CASE EXAMPLE

An afterschool program started thinking more intentionally about the ways of relating that youth engage in, and realized that a lot of conflict between youth results in fights during the program. They set a program goal that youth would use conflict resolution skills to resolve conflict peacefully. They identified a conflict resolution process and defined the component skills that were involved. Program staff set aside specific time each week to intentionally teach conflict resolution skills, and they wanted to understand if their strategy was effective. They decided to start tracking the number of fights that occurred during gym time. They reasoned that if the conflict resolution skills instruction was working, they would start to see a decrease in the number of physical and verbal fights. The staff team came up with a concrete definition of what counted as a fight—what it had to look like and sound like, and a simple recording system. They agreed to track this information and look at it every other week for 3 months. This is what happened:



During the first month of implementing the plan, the total number of gym fights increased. The staff explored why this was happening. They realized that the conflict resolution learning activities were taking place as the first program activity of the day when attendance is lowest, as youth trickle in during the first hour of the program. They readjusted the schedule and put the conflict resolution activities later in the afternoon when the majority of youth were present. After the scheduling change, they started to see a steady decline in the number of fights happening during gym time. Because nothing changed in the structure of the gym activities, they reasoned that the number of opportunities for conflict during gym remained constant, yet the number of physical and verbal fights was decreasing. The staff concluded that the approach was having a positive impact on youth's conflict resolution skills, and they continued to implement it through the rest of the year.

When focusing on using data for improvement in social and emotional learning, the guiding question should be, “Are the youth in my program growing in their capacity to use social and emotional skills in our program and in their lives?” Growth-oriented improvement is about becoming more intentional in the context of your specific program. The goal is not to account for all of the ways that youth may or may not use social and emotional skills in all areas of their lives, it is about being intentional within the time and space that you interact with youth. Using data, in tandem with your instincts and expertise as a youth worker, allows you to make better decisions and programmatic adjustments not just at the end of the program, but along the way, when you can make the most difference.

CONCLUSION

Given the growing awareness and importance of SEL in supporting young people’s success in school and life, youth programs have a tremendous opportunity to strengthen and claim their contributions to the development of these SEL skills and attitudes. While not every youth program should or needs to become a “SEL-focused” program, there is a lot one can do to improve the intentional ways these skills are both *taught* and *caught* in our programs. We encourage you to self-assess your SEL readiness to identify both your current strengths and target areas for improvement. Over time reflect on your progress by revisiting the Social and Emotional Learning Program Readiness Inventory. Are you moving the needle on areas you have targeted for improvement? How have others areas not targeted changed for better or worse? What ideas and resources do you have to improve your intentional SEL efforts going forward? Without deliberate efforts to improve our intentionality in these areas we will likely end up doing less than we could to support the development of the young people. Also see our new, free online resource, [*Social and Emotional Learning in Practice: A Toolkit of Practical Strategies and Resources*](#). This toolkit is a flexible set of practical tools, templates and activities that can be used with staff and youth to increase intentional practices that support social and emotional learning.

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