

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Ways of Being: A Model for Social & Emotional Learning

Dale Blyth, Brandi Olson & Kate Walker

January, 2017¹

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 to incorporate changes to the Ways of Being model.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of social and emotional learning there is always a learner—a young person who is figuring out how to live life in a complex world. Young people in the 21st century must learn to balance and navigate multiple social dynamics, societal demands, and a myriad of choices about their futures (Larson & Tran, 2014). While researchers, funders, schools and community leaders work to understand skills, outcomes and assessments to describe social and emotional learning, practitioners who work with and on behalf of youth have a real-time need to understand the social and emotional learner that exists in every single young person they work with.

In order to make sense of the emerging field of social and emotional learning (SEL), we developed the Ways of Being model (Figure 1) to paint a picture of the whole social and emotional learner—describing the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that exist within a person who is socially and emotionally competent. The model describes dynamic, interactive ways of being that exist in three layers—identity, awareness, and navigation and three dimensions—ways of feeling, ways of relating to others, and ways of doing.

This brief will first explain how the Ways of Being model fits together, and then describe the individual layers and areas that make up the model while offering vignettes from youth who exemplify the social and emotional learning process.

THE WAYS OF BEING MODEL

We developed (and revised, see footnote) the Ways of Being model out of conversations with thought leaders who recognized the need for a teaching tool that could equip practitioners, parents, and youth with a shared conceptual understanding of social and emotional learning. We also built upon a variety of

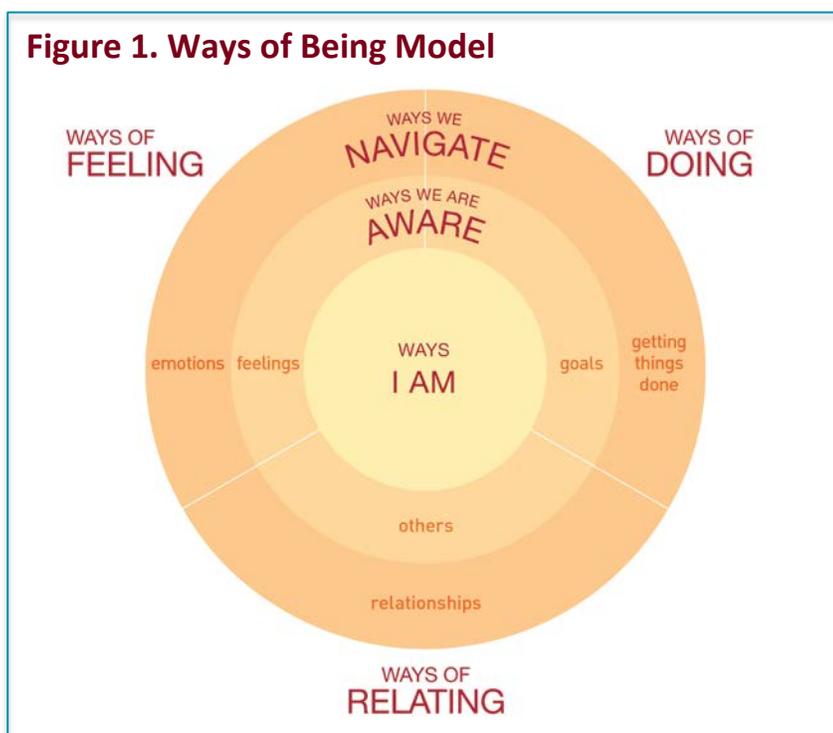
¹ *The Ways of Being model was revised in 2017 to reflect feedback received by practitioners. Originally the model described each ring as Ways I am aware and Ways I navigate. This emphasis on individual action represented a default assumption based in typically Western and Euro-centric cultural values. We changed "I" to "We" to invite a more thoughtful conversation on the intersection of cultural values and SEL.

frameworks that name and organize the skills and areas of social and emotional learning. Another issue brief reviews and compares four frameworks (Hagen, 2013):

- The National Research Council's report, *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*.
- The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research's report, *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance*.
- Perhaps the most widely recognized conceptualization of social and emotional learning competencies is that of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).
- The Strive Network's report, *Beyond Content: Incorporating Social and Emotional Learning into the Strive Framework*.

We looked to CASEL's framework which describes emotional and social skills in categories of awareness and management. We found this distinction helpful in grouping skills from other SEL frameworks and skills that came up in conversations with youth practitioners. Still, we found that existing SEL frameworks generally lacked a way to explain the role of identity and cultural values in the social and emotional learning process. To be a useful tool for teaching, our model needed to account for how youths' sense of self, culture, and beliefs impacted their learning process. The premise that identity plays a critical role in social and emotional development is consistent with emerging research. Larson and Tran (2014), write that answering basic developmental questions such as "who am I?" is essential to youths' ability to understand and navigate social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The dimensions of feeling (emotional), relating (social), and doing (task-oriented) are commonly used throughout the literature to describe the areas of social emotional learning (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Shecktman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013). We often place greater emphasis on the doing aspects of a social and emotional learner, in part because they are often the focus of out-of-school time programs. However, describing a social and emotional learner in only one dimension is an inadequate way to describe youth's experience of learning. For youth to experience genuine social and emotional effectiveness in life they must experience these attitudes, skills, and behaviors as a collective set of tools to be used together, not in isolation. The layers and dimensions in the model add up and interact to describe the whole learner.



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS: FEELING, RELATING, AND DOING

The dimensions represented in the Ways of Being model are Ways of Feeling, Ways of Relating, and Ways of Doing. One use of the model is as a translation guide to compare and talk about other social and emotional learning frameworks. Many practitioners and youth-serving organizations may already be using frameworks and assessment tools to guide social and emotional learning. The Ways of Being model offers language to generally discuss and compare a variety of frameworks for the purpose of helping practitioners become more intentional about supporting social and emotional learning.

Ways of Feeling

Ways of Feeling include all the skills, experiences, and capacity a person uses to identify and make sense of their own emotions. CASEL, Strive Network, National Research Council and Chicago Consortium all use a myriad of terms to describe ways of feeling, including self-awareness, self-management, intrapersonal skills, emotional competence, and self-regulation (Farrington et al., 2012; MHA Labs, 2014; Payton et al., 2008; Strive Task Force, 2013). Practitioners might also include concepts and skills like being reflective, confidence, emotional maturity, or self-control. Youth who are using skills in the ways of being area might be particularly good at self-reflection, talking about their feelings, regulating their emotions, or coping.

Ways of Relating

Ways of Relating include the skills youth need to understand and navigate their interactions with others and develop relationships. Social awareness (CASEL), relationship skills (CASEL), interpersonal skills (National Research Council), or social skills (Chicago Consortium) are all skills that fit easily into this area. Practitioners might also include empathy, intuition, connectedness, belonging, and caring. They describe social skills in action as teamwork, cooperation, communication skills, active listening, and conflict resolution. Youth who demonstrate competence in this area might get along well with others, understand how to work with a team, sense the feelings of those around them, know how to resolve conflict in positive ways, listen with care, or demonstrate compassion.

Ways of Doing

Ways of Doing includes the integration of Ways of Feeling and Ways of Relating, as well as other cognitive skills used to approach tasks and achieve goals. This area of social and emotional competency has drawn significant attention from researchers and leaders in the field. Terms like self-efficacy, growth mindset, habits of mind, mastery orientation, and responsible decision-making infuse the world of youth development and education (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Shechtman et al., 2013; Strive Task Force, 2013).

The fervor with which researchers and practitioners alike attempt to describe ways of doing reflects a deep desire to understand how to cultivate the capacity for action in youth. Contributions such as the Grit Scale (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) and work by Paul Tough (2013) have deepened the field's understanding of the role that grit and perseverance plays in the success of youth. This concept has resonated with practitioners who work to support the development of grit, perseverance, and tenacity, along with the skills of goal-setting, critical thinking, planning for success, and resilience. Youth who use their social and emotional competence for future-oriented action tend to be strong in creative problem solving, curiosity, focus, fearlessness, drive, and assertiveness.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LAYERS: IDENTITY, AWARENESS, NAVIGATION

The Ways of Being model shows three layers that develop through social and emotional learning—identity, awareness, and navigation. The inner layer, identity, is best understood as the core of the social and emotional learner. It represents all of the attitudes and beliefs individuals hold about themselves, their culture, and their potential at any given time. The outer layers of awareness and navigation represent the social and emotional skills that youth use in the ways they feel, relate, and get things done in their lives. Social and emotional learning happens in all three layers simultaneously. There is no defined order to the way that social and emotional learning develops. In fact, many practitioners find that youth may be competent with a particular skill in a specific context, navigating relationships on a sports team, for example, and at the same time they struggle with related skills, such as being aware of others' feelings. Some youth follow a linear social and emotional learning path, but more often, youth move back and forth between the layers of identity, awareness, and navigation as they develop a collection of attitudes and skills. The process of social and emotional learning is complex (Larson & Tran, 2014).

Ways I Am

Identity is used broadly at the core of the circle to include the attitudes, beliefs, and values youth have about themselves in relation to their feelings, relationships, and goals. Nagoaka, Farrington, and Ehrlich (2014) argue that youth success is impossible without the development of an integrated identity that informs youths' sense of self, awareness of values and goals for the future, and relationships that offer support along the way. Through social and emotional learning youths' identity both informs and is formed by experiencing and developing social and emotional skills. As a practitioner, you may recognize other types of attitudes and beliefs that fit into this inner core—sense of self, mindset, character, agency, motivation, hope, self-efficacy, or even cultural identity. Identity belongs at the center of our model because what youth believe about themselves (self-efficacy), the degree to which they feel in control of their lives (agency), and the attitude they have about their future (hope) will influence their social and emotional learning process at every level and in every area of life.

Edward

Edward couldn't read all of the letter sounds. In his afterschool program he would frequently start arguments with the homework help staff that would last the entire tutoring period. When pressed by staff, he once said that some people just weren't born to read. As a third grader, he believed that getting in trouble was his only escape from having to read in front of his peers. In the spring of his third-grade year, Edward was invited to participate in a 1:1 tutoring program that took place before the regular afterschool programs started. With the help of his tutor, Edward mastered basic phonics skills and found some books that he was interested in, at his reading level. The program staff noticed some significant changes in Edward over the spring. Instead of fighting to get out of doing his homework, Edward started to bringing his assignments and occasionally asking for help. He thought the books he was reading looked cool, so he started bringing them out during free time. Other kids at the center viewed the tutoring program as something special and frequently asked when they would get time with the tutor. Edward started to boast about his tutor and the things they worked on. Edward still struggled with reading and didn't want his friends to know about it, but the fighting stopped and generally Edward was more engaged during academic activities.

Edward had internalized his reading difficulty into a fixed mindset—he was born not to read. This core belief about himself was affecting his general demeanor, his relationships with peers and adults, and his progress in school. He believed that he couldn't learn to read and that the only way to avoid embarrassment in school was to fight with other students. He felt that he had no control over his situation; he had a limited sense of agency in his own life. However, as Edward had the experience of actually reading, with the help of a patient tutor, his belief about himself was proven untrue and his motivation to work at reading started to change. He had to do some work to integrate his changing attitude into his self-identity in order to include a version of himself as a reader. As he did so, he found that other attitudes he had about school needed to shift as well. The more Edward, and students like him, adopt hopeful attitudes and beliefs about their capacity, the more likely they will be to engage in opportunities for social and emotional learning.

Ways We Are Aware

The second layer of the model is awareness of self, others, and goals. Awareness often exists on an intuitive level, but it can also be explicitly learned. Cultivating awareness of one's feelings, other people's needs and emotions, and goals informs youths' sense of self, as well as their ability to effectively navigate ways of feeling, relating, and doing. Skills like self-awareness, social awareness, and goal-setting all exist in this layer.

Serena

Serena has a finely tuned sense of awareness of everyone around her. She is adept at understanding how others feel and what makes them tick. Serena also has a strong sense of justice. She quickly interprets others' actions either as a personal wrong or an opportunity for power. Her goals are constantly shifting based on her awareness and perceptions of whether she feels threatened or empowered. When she feels threatened her goals become about gaining control and power. When she feels empowered, she is able to shift towards goals around fairness and justice. At the age of 14, Serena is working out how her empathy is going to shape her relationships and goals. Natasha, the leader of the middle girls' group at Serena's afterschool program sees that Serena is at a turning point, too. Natasha observes that Serena often uses her keen awareness of others' feelings to be a bully. At the same time, Natasha has observed Serena come to the defense of younger kids in the program when she felt that they were being picked on. Natasha knows that how Serena uses her skills of awareness to navigate relationships and future goals will have a big impact on her future. Over the summer, Natasha took a risk and invited Serena to be a junior counselor for the elementary day camp. After the first day when Serena was asked to walk a group of 3rd graders to the park all by herself, she recognized that she was being given a real leadership opportunity and that it was up to her to keep everyone safe. Through frequent check-ins and feedback conversations, Natasha helped Serena practice using her awareness skills to navigate her responsibilities as a leader, her relationships with the other junior counselors, and her own feelings about herself along the way.

Serena developed excellent skills in the ways that she was aware of her feelings, others, and goals. But she was not consistently using those skills in a positive way, and it was starting to harm her future opportunities. An experienced practitioner, Natasha recognized Serena's social and emotional strengths and created an opportunity for her to develop skills for navigating in real life. We can imagine that Serena's positive experience as a junior counselor also informed her developing identity. Serena frequently saw herself as a victim of peers and adults' attempts to control her, but the experience of leading a group of younger students challenged her existing mindset. While this summer experience was powerful, it is too soon to know if it will have a lasting impact on her behavior in high school.

Ways I Navigate

The outer layer describes the process of navigating emotions, relationships, and getting things done. The act of navigating is action-packed, full of opportunities for youth to be the agents of change in their lives. Just as a mountain climber must draw on navigation skills to determine which path to take up and over the mountain, youth use navigation skills to determine how to manage their emotions, interact with others, and overcome challenges to meeting their goals. Navigation skills include things like self-management, self-regulation, relationships skills, problem solving, time management, perseverance, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Youth with developing skills in this layer can survey the opportunities and challenges before them and choose the best strategies and skills to get to where they want to go.

Nelson

Nelson is a 10th grader who relies heavily on his navigation skills. He self-identifies as, "not really getting people." Though he is not particularly good at picking up on social cues and nonverbal communication, he has developed a set of navigational guidelines that helps him get along well with others and succeed in school. As a high school student intent on graduating and becoming an electrician, he is particularly articulate about his strategy for navigating social situations. He told his guidance counselor, "If I laugh when I don't understand what someone is saying, because I can't tell if they are making fun of me or if they are laughing at something else, then others will laugh too." Nelson uses humor to navigate relationships instead of an intuitive awareness of others' thoughts and feelings. Nelson's counselor shared that Nelson is deeply committed to achieving his goals, but that his goals are clearly adopted from his parents' wishes. His parents set a goal for him early on that he would graduate from high school and get a good job. His mom researched high schools and chose a school that she thought was a good fit. Nelson chose to become an electrician as a result of asking family members and teachers what they thought he would be good at, and several of his uncles are electricians. He willingly accepts others' goals for his life, and works to make them happen. He tracks his homework, has great attendance, seeks out extracurricular opportunities related to his career choice, and he is generally a reliable student. Nelson's greatest challenge has been learning how to navigate his own emotions. When he was younger, he was frequently suspended for explosions of anger and aggressive behavior. His teacher at the time helped him learn how to deal with his emotions by minimally recognizing that his frustration was building and then deal with his feelings by taking a break or going for a short walk. Nelson still doesn't always understand what he is feeling, but he has learned some coping strategies to manage his behavior. Nelson is an expert navigator; he is a successful student and gets along well with peers and adults.

While many youth rely on their awareness skills to improve their navigation skills, students like Nelson show us that social and emotional learning is not a linear path. In this case, Nelson became motivated to develop some awareness skills when he started to see how lack of awareness of his feelings was leading to behavior that was keeping him from achieving his goals. He needed self-awareness to better navigate getting important things done. Nelson's example highlights how strong navigation skills can lead to skills of awareness.

USING THE MODEL

Our Ways of Being model does not prescribe a definition of social and emotional success. Instead, the model is designed to engage youth's cultural values and identity in order to support a variety of SEL skills, and we encourage staff to collaborate with youth to determine which SEL skills are most important.

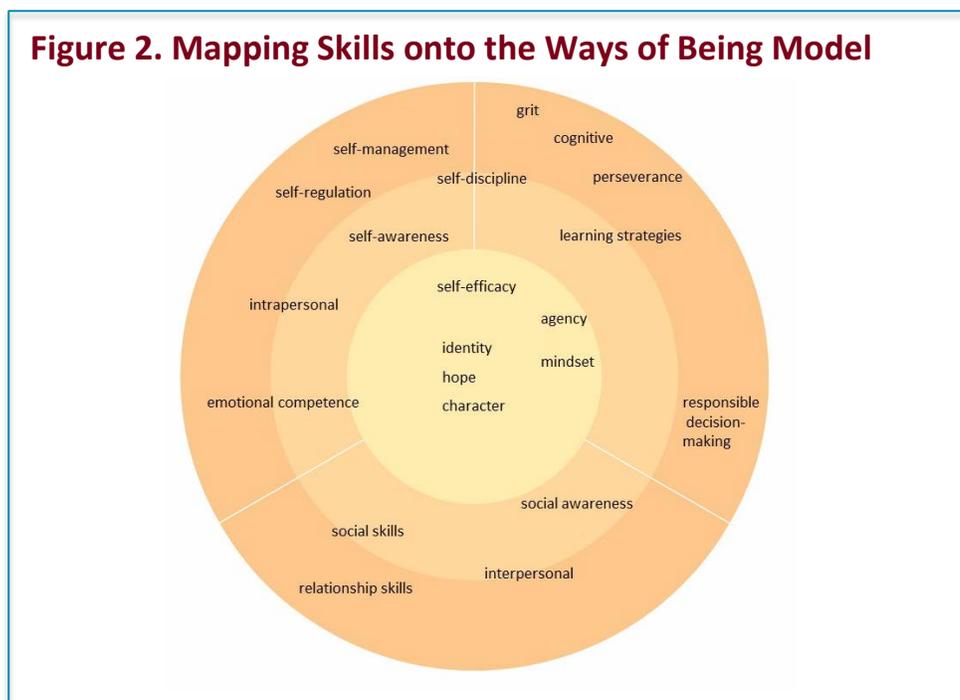
The Ways of Being model can be used in many ways to increase intentional support of social and emotional learning, but we recommend starting with three specific applications:

1. Use the model to start a conversation about social and emotional learning.
2. Use the model as a resource to align the tools that you are already using.
3. Use the model to identify areas where you can improve the intentional support of social and emotional learning.

Start a Conversation

Chances are you will find something in this model that resonates with your experience and also parts that raise more questions. Social and emotional learning is dynamic and complex, and there is no one right way to talk about it, teach it, or experience it. It is in the discussion of "What does 'Ways I am' really mean?" or "How do I identify skills that will help the youth I work with develop awareness of their feelings?" that deep understanding of the social and emotional learning process will develop.

There are multiple sets of skills, frameworks, and program guides that have the potential to effectively support social and emotional learning in youth. Figure 2 compares several prominent SEL frameworks by mapping key skills onto the Ways of Being model. As early versions of this model were shared with practitioners, disagreements about where each term belonged were common. Practitioners engaged in thoughtful conversations that revealed insights into how they defined terms and envisioned skills being used, and that is the point. There is not a correct way to map out all of the social and emotional skills. Getting it all to fit in a tidy box is much less important than the dialogue that takes place in the process. The practitioners often commented that they were gaining deeper understanding about what the skills look like and sound like in action, which helps them to be more effective in supporting the social and emotional learners that they work with on a regular basis.



Align Existing Tools

The Ways of Being model is intended to compliment other resources on social and emotional learning, not replace them. The model can help you evaluate your existing practices through the lens of a comprehensive way to think about SEL. To begin, try this exercise:

Pick a curriculum, assessment tool, or program activity that you use on a regular basis. This resource may explicitly focus on social and emotional skills or it may just generally fit into the dimensions of feeling, relating, and doing. Identify some of the core skills or objectives of the resource and find a place for the terms in the Ways of Being model. Consider what dimension is most closely aligned and what layer the skills best fits. Is the resource comprehensive, addressing multiple components of SEL or is it focused on a particular area or type of skill? Take this exercise to the next level by asking a colleague to do the same thing. Compare your answers and talk about similarities and differences and what thinking is behind your responses.

Identify Areas for Improvement

After discussing the model and mapping it onto your current SEL strategies, you are ready to consider areas of social and emotional learning where you want to put more focus. Perhaps the curriculum that you use is strong in Ways of Relating, but does not give much attention to developing awareness of emotions in the Ways of Feeling. Alternatively, you may identify that your program activities already include practices that touch on all of the Ways of Being, but a group of your students seem to struggle with navigation skills around relationships. By identifying areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, intentional practice increases.

Practitioners have an important role in cultivating social and emotional learning experiences with the youth they work with. The next brief in this series will offer an in-depth exploration of strategies and tools for practitioners who want to deepen their expertise and increase their intentionality about social and emotional learning.

REFERENCES

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2014). Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies. Retrieved from www.casel.org
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–101.
- Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills.
- Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance.
- Hagen, E. (2013). Social and emotional learning: Comparing frameworks. University of Minnesota, Extension Center for Youth Development, Minneapolis, MN.
- Larson, R. W., & Tran, S. P. (2014). Invited Commentary : Positive Youth Development and Human Complexity. *J Youth Adolescence*, 43, 1012–1017.
- Lawson, M. A., & Lawson, H. A. (2013). New conceptual frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 432–479.
- MHA Labs. (2014). MHA Labs Practice Guide. Retrieved from www.mhalabs.org
- Payton, J., Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2008). The positive impact of social and emotional learning for kindergarten to eighth-grade students: Findings from three scientific reviews (pp. 1–50).
- Shechtman, N., DeBarger, A. H., Dornsife, C., Rosier, S., & Yarnall, L. (2013). Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century.
- Strive Task Force. (2013). Volume I : Social and Emotional Competencies and their Relationship to Academic Achievement. Beyond Content: Incorporating Social and Emotional Learning into the Strive Framework.
- Tough, P. (2013). *How Children Succeed*. New York City: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing.