



# The Case for a Comprehensive Approach to Social-Emotional Learning

Communities can strengthen children's social-emotional skills by taking a holistic approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) that includes all learning environments and developmental stages.

A wealth of evidence reveals the positive effects of universal, classroom-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs for children (Durlak et al., 2022). Alongside this evidence is broad recognition among scholars and field leaders that SEL benefits are even greater when children experience SEL throughout their day, across home, school, and out-of-school time environments, and throughout their developmental stages. This understanding has led field leaders to expand SEL frameworks to incorporate the full ecosystem of a child's experiences (CASEL, 2020). A meta-analysis on the impact of universal, school-based SEL outcomes found that participation positively influenced school climate and safety (Cipriano et al., 2021). When implemented holistically, with a coordinated, community-wide approach, SEL can build stronger communities

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and school culture, and support inclusive, equitable learning experiences (Durlak et al., 2022).

This paper lays out the characteristics of an approach to holistic SEL implementation, connects those characteristics to a body of research, and points out key features. This information will help school communities and youth-serving organizations prioritize and focus their efforts on providing holistic SEL to children.

# Theoretical Foundations

The case for attending holistically to SEL has deep theoretical roots. The Ecological Framework for Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) places the child at the center of six systemic levels that shape an individual's development (see Figure 1). These levels are the individual; the microsystem, which includes the child's family, friends, educators, and others who directly interact with and influence the child; the mesosystem, which includes connections between individuals in the microsystem; the exosystem, which includes individuals and circumstances that indirectly influence the child's microsystem, such as the caregivers' work schedules or the community's resources; the macrosystem, which includes broad societal forces that shape a child's environment, such as cultural values, customs, and laws; and the chronosystem, which represents time's influence on the child through experiences and developmental changes.

We learn implicitly and explicitly throughout our days and over the course of our lives. A key premise of Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model is that factors in each systemic level

influence developmental outcomes. Thus, the likelihood of affecting outcomes increases when multiple systems are addressed, both at once and over time. Bronfenbrenner's model

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suggests the limits of interventions that occur only in one time or place, as these experiences may be reinforced or countered by messages received elsewhere.

Furthermore, the model suggests that both implicit and explicit learning are powerful forces in development: a child learns through constant observation of how peers and adults interact with them, each other, and broader institutions (Bandura, 1977; Greer et al., 2006), and when adults explicitly teach them vocabulary, skills, and strategies (Durlak et al., 2011). Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework and supportive empirical research, which this paper will review, have important implications for those invested in enduring SEL.

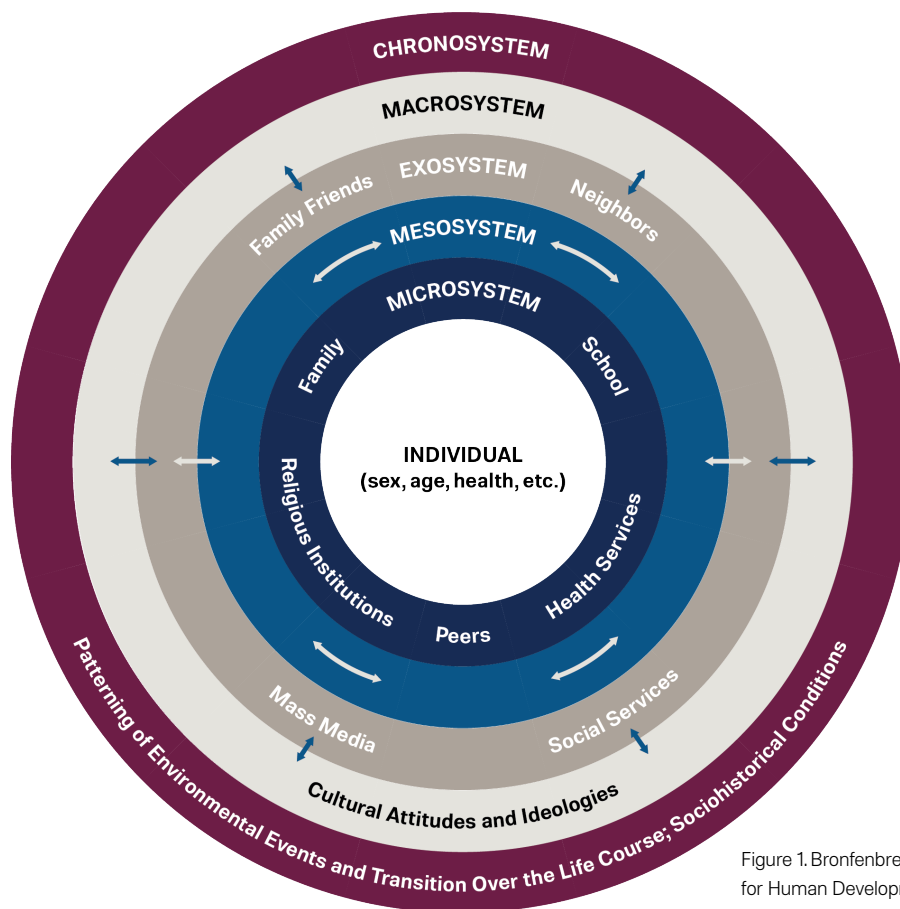


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework for Human Development. Adapted from *Child Development* (p. 33), by J. W. Santrock, 2008, McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

# The Components of a Holistic Approach to SEL

A holistic approach to SEL supports both children's and educators' social-emotional competencies, provides SEL throughout the day and across the stages of child development, and occurs in positive, supportive environments. The following sections review the evidence on the effects of these approaches to SEL.

## A Holistic Approach to SEL

1. Provides SEL throughout the child's day
2. Reaches the child across developmental stages throughout their school career
3. Supports educators' social-emotional competencies and well-being
4. Supports a positive implementation environment

### 1. SEL Throughout the Day

Positive outcomes increase when SEL is integrated into academic content and reinforced throughout the day (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Mahoney et al., 2020). Additionally, SEL-specific findings affirm broader findings that learning takes place across time and place and is supported by opportunities to practice and apply learning to a range of contexts and situations (Aspen Institute, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019).

Reinforcing social-emotional skills and vocabulary in all corners of the school (such as the lunchroom, the playground, and in all classrooms) supports SEL outcomes (Zins & Elias, 2006) and is often considered to be a core element of high-quality SEL implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Recognizing the powerful effects of integrating and reinforcing SEL across time and place, developmental psychologists and educators have advocated for more coordinated approaches to SEL in schools, districts, and communities (Greenberg et al., 2003; Pittman et al., 2003; Little & Pittman, 2018).

One response to this call is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Collaborating District Initiative, which supports districts in creating a coherent, districtwide approach to SEL. This approach often involves coordinating SEL standards, professional learning for educators and leaders, and SEL integration into other district efforts (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Districts engaged in this work have experienced an array of positive outcomes, including improvements in students'

social-emotional competencies and grade point averages, and decreases in disciplinary interventions (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

Mounting evidence also supports the value of an ecological approach to youth development and broader community improvement (Lynn et al., 2018). For example, HighScope and Chicago Child-Parent Centers have taken a multipronged intervention approach to supporting positive child development, focusing interventions on both children and their parents. These organizations have produced positive long-term child outcomes, including the requirement of fewer remedial services, higher high school completion rates, and fewer arrests in adolescence and adulthood (Blair & Raver, 2014; Heckman & Kautz, 2013; McClelland et al., 2017).

The Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative is a more recent community-level effort focused on supporting the collaboration of districts and out-of-school time providers on SEL work. Research on this initiative is ongoing, but community members have reported perceived benefits from adopting common language and approaches to SEL curricula and professional learning (Schwartz et al., 2020).

Partnerships between parents and teachers are associated with increased efficacy of SEL interventions (Grolnick & Slowjaczek, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Given this, "best practice" summaries of the collective practice and research knowledge on SEL program outcomes emphasize the importance of parental involvement both at home and at school (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017).

#### Features of SEL Throughout the Day

- Universal, classroom-based SEL curricula that are reinforced in all parts of the school day
- Intentional SEL programming for out-of-school time programs
- Home communication and reinforcement
- Common language and coordinated approaches within and across settings

### 2. SEL Across Developmental Stages Throughout the School Career

Social-emotional skills developed early in life predict those developed later in life (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002; Oberle et al., 2016), so it's important to support SEL across time as well as





place. While core social-emotional competencies broadly apply to all ages and grade levels, the contexts and presentation of these abilities evolve. As adolescents develop, they can understand and manage increasingly complex emotions and relationships with decreasing levels of adult support and guidance (Denham, 2018). Therefore, SEL programming must mature with the child, with content tailored to meet developmental needs.

Children's consistent exposure to SEL improves outcomes. Children participating in the Second Step® Elementary program who received more lessons in one school year experienced greater gains in SEL and lower levels of disruptive behavior than those who received fewer (Low et al., 2015). A two-year study of children receiving Second Step® Early Learning programming showed significant improvement in children's social interaction and social independence and decreased externalizing and internalizing problems after one year of participating; these effects were larger following the second year of participation in the program (Ocasio et al., 2015). Other SEL programs have also revealed enhanced outcomes when implemented for multiple years (Blair & Raver, 2014; Hagelskamp et al., 2013).

#### Features of SEL Across Developmental Stages and Throughout the School Career

- Age-appropriate SEL curricula for early learning through high school
- Regular use of SEL programming throughout each school year and across the course of development

### 3. Educator SEL

Among the most central findings from cross-disciplinary learning science research is that both academic learning and SEL are deeply rooted in relationships. Positive relationships that support learning are characterized by consistency, trust, care, and responsiveness (Zins & Elias, 2006; Osher et al., 2018) and contribute to feelings of connectedness, a sense of agency, and the ability to regulate emotions, cognition, and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Murray et al., 2015; Osher et al., 2018). Kindergarteners' relationships with their teachers affect academic and behavioral outcomes through middle school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and adolescents' relationships with teachers have been linked to increased school motivation, success expectations, and satisfaction, as well as higher grades (Roeser et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1996; Baker et al., 2008). Furthermore, scholars have emphasized the key role that positive adult-child relationships have in advancing equity through SEL (Jagers et al., 2018). In relationships that advance equity, teachers and other adults support SEL by celebrating differences, creating a warm and welcoming learning environment, and focusing on children's assets rather than their deficits (National Equity Project, n.d.).

Another critical way adults support SEL is by modeling behavior. As a social, relationship-based enterprise, learning often occurs through observing and imitating the behavior of others, including teachers, parents, peers, and siblings (Bandura, 1977). Adults' social-emotional competencies shape children's behaviors and SEL, even in the absence of direct instruction (Grusec, 1992). Educators can also support student SEL by using simple routines and strategies to build relationships and foster a positive climate even outside of scheduled SEL time. Routines such as Warm Welcome, morning meetings, and Emotional Check-Ins are research-based and feasible (Cook et al., 2018; Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Therefore, it's particularly important for teachers to attend to their own SEL.

Modeling social-emotional competencies can be difficult in stressful situations, and teaching consistently ranks among the highest-stress professions (Gallup, 2017). Stress and burnout can impair teachers' instructional effectiveness and classroom climate, and in turn hamper the social-emotional and academic growth of their students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, socially and emotionally resilient teachers are more likely to actively monitor the classroom, engage students in learning, demonstrate patience, listen attentively, and maintain their composure during challenging student encounters (Beltman et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kunter et al., 2013). Given

that relationships and modeling are so important for student learning, it follows that teachers' well-being is a strong predictor of classroom quality—a stronger predictor than even teacher educational attainment and experience (La Paro et al., 2009).

#### Features of Educator SEL

- Adult SEL programs that provide both learning and ongoing practice, such as incorporating simple routines
- Staff training and supports to help educators develop positive relationships with each other and with children, manage stress, advance equity, and develop efficacy

### 4. Positive Implementation Environment

Education scholars have long documented that a positive school culture and climate, characterized by high levels of trust, benefit students and teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Edgar Schien (1995) defines culture as how things are done at an organization and climate as how children and adults feel about how things are done. Compared to low-trust schools, teachers in high-trust schools are more likely to work with parents and experiment with new teaching methods to improve their practice, and students have better attendance and perseverance (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Recognizing the importance of school and classroom culture and climate, schools have widely adopted systems and tools like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to improve learning environments. In addition to laying a strong foundation for SEL program implementation, these efforts have had positive effects on a variety of outcomes, including increased academic performance and reduced suspensions and office disciplinary referrals (Bradshaw et al., 2010; James et al., 2019)

Positive learning environments have also been directly linked to improved social-emotional outcomes. PBIS is associated with improvements in students' social-emotional competencies, prosocial behaviors (behaviors intended to help others), and emotion-regulation abilities, and with decreases in aggressive and disruptive behaviors, office disciplinary referrals, and concentration problems (Waasdoorp et al., 2012). Studies of CLASS, an observation and training tool to improve learning environments, produced similar findings: Children in classrooms with a more positive, supportive culture showed greater gains in social and cognitive skills, including inhibitory control, working memory, and language and literacy skills (Hamre et al., 2014).

Culture and climate are so important to SEL outcomes that they're often considered a foundational element of SEL program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Scaccia et al., 2015). Teachers working in schools with more positive cultures rated the quality of the delivery of their SEL program higher and used more supplementary materials (Domitrovich et al., 2019). Principal support, which shapes the implementation environment, also influences students' SEL outcomes (Kam et al., 2003).

A meta-analysis of more than 200 elementary, middle, and high school SEL programs found that at high-quality implementation sites—those where the SEL program was embedded in school culture and consistently used and reinforced across contexts—students' academic gains were twice that of students in low-quality implementation sites, reductions in conduct problems were nearly twice as large, and reductions in emotional distress were more than twice as large (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, 2016). Other studies have found positive effects for SEL programs only among sites that have implemented the programs well (Battistich et al., 2000; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014; Durlak, 2016).

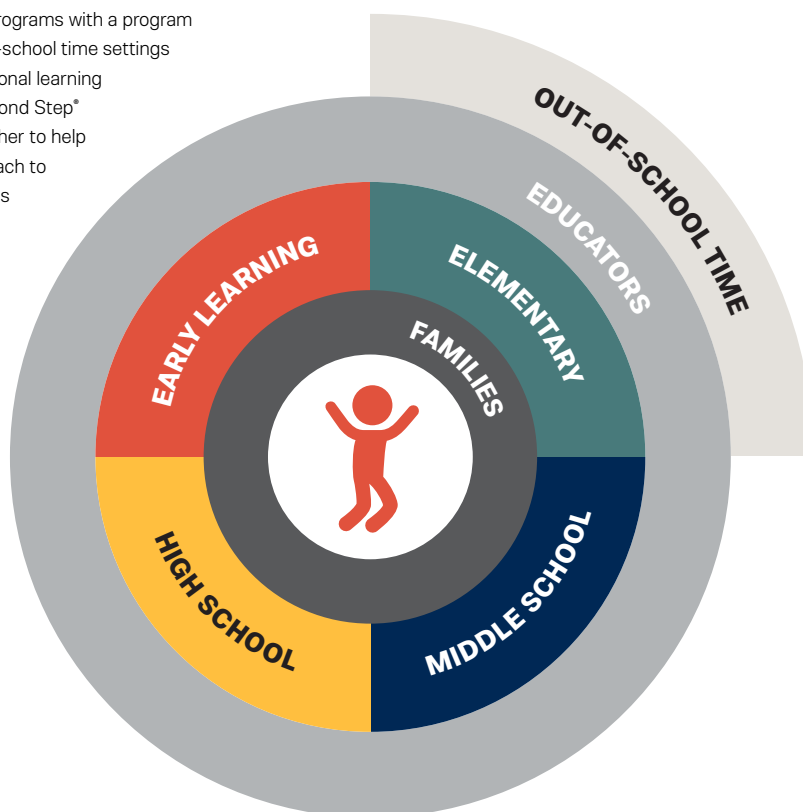
#### Features of a Positive Implementation Environment

- High-quality schoolwide SEL implementation
- Principal and district-level leadership and support
- Intentional systems and structures to support climate and culture

## Holistic SEL: A Shared Vision

Research makes clear that the more holistic a community's approach to SEL, the more benefits there are for children. Coordinating the social-emotional language, skills, and strategies educators, families, and out-of-school time providers use gives children consistent messaging and critical reinforcement throughout their days and school years. Additionally, children and teens benefit when adults make efforts to provide positive and supportive learning environments and model the social-emotional competencies they hope to nurture in youth. SEL programming can have beneficial effects on children, but isolated approaches leave opportunities untapped. Conversely, a holistic approach to SEL brings communities together around a shared vision for how children can grow, learn, and be empowered with skills for life.

Combining classroom-based programs with a program designed specifically for out-of-school time settings and a social-emotional professional learning program for educators, the Second Step® family of programs works together to help educators take a holistic approach to building supportive communities for every child through social-emotional learning.



## Committee for Children's Work and Vision

Committee for Children is a global nonprofit that champions children's safety and well-being through social-emotional learning. To fulfill our vision of safe children thriving in a peaceful world, our organization has developed research- and evidence-based SEL resources, including the Second Step® family of programs. Committee for Children approaches SEL with a child-centric and global perspective. Our partnerships with school communities have inspired a long-standing commitment to supporting educators' needs for ease of implementation and scalability. With the goal of reaching 100 million children annually by 2030, we advocate and partner with others in the field to fulfill our mission.

Champions of SEL—in districts, schools, homes, and community-based organizations serving youth—are asking for supports that enable a holistic approach to social-emotional learning. In response, we're expanding our efforts to support these leaders through programs, advocacy, innovation, and research.

Other field leaders have used the word "systemic" to describe the comprehensive approach we explore in this paper. Committee for Children has chosen to use the word "holistic" because

"systemic" can lead readers to disproportionately focus on adult systems, rather than on the children who we place at the center of our work.

### Our Research Team

Committee for Children's team of researchers works with cross-functional partners inside and outside the organization to support the development and continuous improvement of our programs and products.

### Resources

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[Anti-Racism and Anti-Bias Resources](#)  
[Second Step® Early Learning](#) | [Review of Research](#)  
[Second Step® Elementary](#) | [Review of Research](#)  
[Second Step® Middle School](#) | [Review of Research](#)  
[Second Step® High School](#) | [Review of Research](#)  
[Second Step® Out-of-School Time](#) | [Review of Research](#)  
[Second Step® SEL for Adults](#) | [Review of Research](#)

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