**REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

# Second Step® Out-of-School Time

## Introduction to the Research

High-quality social-emotional learning (SEL) programs—both within and outside of the classroom—have short-term and long-term benefits for children (Durlak et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). School-based SEL programming has been linked to positive social behavior, academic success, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and less drug use (Taylor et al., 2017). SEL programming in out-of-school-time (OST) settings is related to children's improved self-perceptions; increased school bonding; improved social behaviors, grades, and school attendance rates; and fewer problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2010).

Research shows that in-school and out-of-school SEL programs are effective independently of one another (Durlak et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). But research also suggests that SEL interventions may be even more effective when children are exposed to SEL programs in both in-school and out-of-school contexts, and when the SEL programs are aligned in content and present children with a set of consistent adult expectations (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003; Pittman et al., 2001). Leading OST and SEL scholars and practitioners have long advocated for more coordinated approaches to SEL (Greenberg et al., 2003; Pittman et al., 2001).

However, not all SEL programs are created equal. For both in-school and OST settings, meta-analyses have found that effective programs include "SAFE" attributes: They are intentionally sequenced (S) in a logical progression, use active (A) learning to help children gain skills and knowledge, are focused (F) on developing social-emotional skills, and are explicit (E)

about the competencies they aim to develop (Durlak et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). Additionally, a review of SEL programs in OST contexts finds that highly effective programs provide safe and positive environments; support high-quality relationships; are developmentally appropriate, relevant, and engaging for children; and provide opportunities for direct skill building (Jones et al., 2017).

Second Step® Out-of-School Time is characterized by the features of SAFE SEL programs, supports OST organizations in creating welcoming environments, and provides age-appropriate skill-building opportunities.

## Program Overview

Second Step Out-of-School Time is divided into four units:

- **Foundational Unit:** Community Building
- **Unit 1:** Growth Mindset & Goal Setting
- **Unit 2:** Emotion Management
- **Unit 3:** Empathy & Kindness

Although the units are designed to be used sequentially, each unit relies on and reinforces the others in nonlinear ways. For example, positive communities support intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive components of SEL through regular adult and peer modeling (Lipsett, 2011; Wyman et al., 2010), and strong emotion-management or emotion-regulation skills have been associated with goal setting (Liff, 2003) and empathy (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011). For this reason, it's important for facilitators to regularly reinforce past learning and make explicit connections between topics.

## Program Components

- Second Step® Out-of-School Time has two components:
- Print activities for facilitators who directly teach and support children's SEL
- Program training and program supports for OST site leaders and facilitators

### Print Activities

Second Step Out-of-School Time walks children and facilitators through SEL concepts and research-based strategies that support social-emotional development. The program is largely aligned to Second Step Elementary and is rooted in the same core research base, but Second Step Out-of-School Time differs from the elementary school program in ways that address OST providers' specific needs.

First, Second Step Out-of-School Time provides a foundational unit on Community Building that is not found in Second Step Elementary. This foundational unit supports SEL implementation (Berg et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017) and reflects the core values of many OST settings, which have long prioritized building strong communities and relationships.

Second, the program's active, learner-centered activities are designed to engage children in movement, acting, and art projects that fit naturally into the OST context.

Finally, the print activities provide facilitators with embedded tips and adaptations. These supports are both instructional and structural. They provide simple instructional tips and help OST educators—who may begin their work with little or no prior formal training in education (School's Out Washington, 2008)—adapt the activities for resource and space availability.

### Program Training and Program Supports

Environment and adult behavior both influence children's SEL (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Positive educator-child relationships in OST settings support academic outcomes (Pierce et al., 2010). Accordingly, given educators' influence, training and support for OST staff who deliver SEL programs have been linked to positive social-emotional outcomes for children (Beckett et al., 2001; Miller, 2007).

The program training for Second Step Out-of-School Time provides OST facilitators with easily accessible resources that support high-quality implementation. The program training helps site leaders and facilitators understand what SEL is and why it's important, the structure and organization of the program, and strategies to engage and educate children using Second Step Out-of-School Time activities. The program training includes information and resources that facilitators can use when preparing to use the program, as well as information they can reference as they lead children through the activities.

## SEL and Executive-Function Skills

Executive functioning encompasses various interrelated cognitive processes that enable a child to ignore distractions (Klenberg et al., 2001), inhibit behavior responses (Ciairano et al., 2007), shift between various tasks (Zelazo et al., 2003), and solve complex problems (Zelazo et al., 2003). These cognitive processes underlie a child's ability to engage in flexible, goal-directed behaviors (Garon et al., 2008). Executive functioning is associated with improved reading comprehension and has been found to predict school readiness (García-Madruga et al., 2016). Children with strong executive-function skills are less likely to engage in impulsive behavior (Riggs et al., 2006) and more likely to demonstrate social-emotional skills like empathy (Riggs et al., 2006; Decety & Svetlova, 2012), emotion regulation (Riggs et al., 2006), and cooperative behaviors among peers (Ciairano et al., 2007).

Second Step Out-of-School Time explicitly teaches children executive-function skills like inhibitory control and focusing and shifting attention. The program also indirectly supports children's development of these and higher-level executive-function skills like planning and flexible thinking in its activities. Additionally, Second Step Out-of-School Time includes training materials and embedded tips that help educators create conditions—such as orderly, predictable environments and scaffolded learning—that have been associated with development of executive functioning (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

# Unit Topics

## Community Building

OST communities have long been guided by positive youth-development principles, which stress the importance of supportive relationships, opportunities "for belonging, and positive social norms (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2004). These principles are linked to OST program quality (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) and align to decades of broader education research that finds that positive culture and climate support youth development and learning (Thapa et al., 2013). School and classroom climate are linked to children's motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993; Furrer "& Skinner, 2003) and academic performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Positive school climate has also been found to mitigate the relationship between academic achievement and socioeconomic status (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Positive youth-development principles, site climate, and SEL are inextricably linked, in that they rely on an overlapping set of conditions for learning (Berg et al., 2017; Hamilton et al., 2004). These conditions include (but are not limited to) cultural competence, feelings of inclusion and connectedness, and adult social-emotional competence and modeling and reinforcement of social-emotional competencies (Berg et al., 2017; Hamilton et al., 2004).

Second Step® Out-of-School Time helps facilitators build strong OST communities by guiding children to learn about one another and by teaching and providing opportunities to practice the social-emotional skills that nurture strong relationships. Second Step Out-of-School Time also helps facilitators establish conditions for positive youth development and a positive climate through activities and tips that guide groups of children through the process of creating and regularly revisiting group norms.

## Growth Mindset & Goal Setting

Growth mindset, the belief that intelligence and personality are malleable rather than fixed (Dweck et al., 2014), supports learning across content areas. Growth mindset is important to social-emotional development and success in school and life because individuals' beliefs about their intelligence and personalities influence their perseverance and resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Children who are taught and believe that their intelligence and social skills are flexible have stronger course-completion rates, more successfully navigate school transitions, and are less aggressive when faced with peer victimization or exclusion (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Yeager & Miu, 2011). Additionally, some evidence suggests that providing children with growth mindset interventions before they engage in activities designed to develop executive-function skills supports the development of those skills (Autin & Croizet, 2012).

Mindset is closely related to how individuals approach and set goals. Individuals with a growth mindset tend to set "mastery goals," which are focused on improvement, as opposed to goals focused on performance compared to others (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010). The use of mastery goals, in turn, is associated with increases in self-efficacy (Bong, 2009; Hulleman et al., 2010), positive personal relationships (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010; Rodkin et al., 2013), increased empathy (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010), and prosocial behavior, or behavior intended to help others (Hulleman et al., 2010; Ohtani & Okada, 2018; Yang & Frye, 2018).

Second Step Out-of-School Time supports children's growth mindset development by teaching them to use positive, "helpful" thoughts and by teaching facilitators to praise effort over achievement (Jenkins et al., 2015; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Royer et al., 2019). The program also supports children in setting realistic improvement goals, breaking goals into manageable pieces, and identifying strategies to follow through on goals. These tasks draw on and help children practice executive-function skills like inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Lensing & Elsner, 2018; Röthlisberger et al., 2013).

**Emotion Management**

Emotions play a large and complex role in children's outcomes. Emotions and children's ability to regulate them are related to how children use executive-function skills like attention and memory, influence how children approach and solve problems (Blair, 2002; Kwon et al., 2017), and can catalyze and support motivation and engagement (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007; Valiente et al., 2012; Valiente et al., 2014). Emotion regulation also affects children's social outcomes. The ability to regulate one's own emotions predicts social skills, friendship quality, peer acceptance (Blair et al., 2015), and teachers' perceptions of children's social competence among their peers (Contreras et al., 2000).

Identifying emotions is foundational to emotion regulation (Ford & Gross, 2018). Additionally, the ability to identify others' emotional states is associated with higher levels of social competence and lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problems in childhood (Trentacosta & Fine, 2010).

Second Step® Out-of-School Time helps children identify their own and others' emotions, teaches strategies for regulating emotions (Jacobs & Gross, 2014; Webb et al., 2012), and provides hypothetical and role-play scenarios for children to practice using these strategies.

**Empathy & Kindness**

The ability to take others' perspectives (also referred to as theory of mind or cognitive empathy) and vicariously experience others' emotional states (also referred to as affective empathy) lays the foundation for healthy social relationships and altruistic behavior (Batson et

al., 2009; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Perspective-taking skills have been associated with children's ability to self-regulate emotions (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011) as well as with a broad set of prosocial behaviors, including helping, cooperating, and comforting (Imuta et al., 2016). Cognitive and affective empathy are both negatively associated with bullying and positively associated with defending bullying victims (Zych et al., 2016).

Second Step Out-of-School Time helps children understand why empathy is important, teaches them perspective-taking strategies, and provides them with opportunities to practice and reflect on these strategies. Activities in the program emphasize the importance of using empathy to act kindly and regularly prompt children to reflect on how empathy and kindness can improve their community.

## Conclusion

Second Step Out-of-School Time is grounded in the research discussed in this review and designed to support SEL in OST communities. The four units of activities provide children with opportunities to learn, practice, and revisit skills that will help them develop healthy relationships with peers and adults, a growth mindset, and social-emotional skills like emotion regulation and empathy.

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