

# The What and Why of SEL

Research linking SEL to student outcomes  
List of 25 leading SEL programs

**D**ecades of research suggest that preparing children to be caring, ethical, contributing adults requires supporting them in the development of social, emotional, and character skills that include focusing and deploying attention, understanding and managing emotions, empathizing with and respecting others, navigating social conflicts effectively, and standing up for principles of justice and fairness.

## The Link Between SEL and Student Outcomes

A great deal of research over the last several decades has demonstrated the benefits of social and emotional skills.

Classrooms function more effectively and student learning increases when children have the skills to focus their attention, manage negative emotions, navigate relationships, and persist in the face of difficulty.

Children who can effectively manage their thinking, attention, and behavior are also more likely to have better grades and higher standardized test scores. Those with strong social skills are more likely to make and sustain friendships and engage in learning.

Social and emotional skills also serve as important protective factors in the face of negative life events or chronic stressors and support general well-being.

**Key Features of Effective SEL Programs**  
Research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation shows that SEL efforts are most successful when they:

- **Occur within supportive contexts.** School and classroom contexts supportive of SEL feature adult and child practices and activities that build skills and establish prosocial norms.
- **Build adult competencies.** Promoting teachers' own social and emotional competence and pursuing the ongoing integration of that competence with pedagogical skills is key.
- **Acknowledge features of the broader community context.** Take into consideration the environments and contexts in which children are learning, living, and growing by building family/school/community partnerships.

- **Target a key set of skills across multiple domains of development.** This includes targeting emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, and cognitive regulation or executive function skills.
- **Set reasonable goals.** This includes articulating a series of short- and long-term outcomes that are reasonable goals or expectations.

### Common Implementation Challenges

Despite the impressive and expanding body of evidence in favor of programs and interventions focused on social and emotional skills, a number of important challenges remain:

- **Ensuring sufficient exposure and intensity.** SEL programs often take the form of brief lessons that are implemented during short sections in academic classes and are often skipped due to tight schedules.

- **Prioritizing and integrating SEL in daily practices.** SEL skills are often not seen as a core part of the educational mission, but instead as extracurricular, add-on, or secondary, resulting in little effort to apply the skills in daily life.
- **Extending SEL beyond classrooms.** Most SEL programs focus primarily on what goes on in the classroom, but SEL skills are also needed on playgrounds and in lunchrooms, hallways, and bathrooms, as well as out-of-school settings.
- **Ensuring sufficient staff support and training.** Teachers, school staff, and adults who staff out-of-school settings often receive little training in how to promote SEL skills, deal with peer conflict, or address other SEL-related issues.
- **Facilitating program ownership and buy-in.** School administrators and staff sometimes see programs sourced from outsiders adopted without local consensus as being too top-down, and lack ownership and trust.
- **Using data to inform decision-making.** Few schools employ data to guide decision-making about the selection, implementation, or ongoing assessment of the programs and strategies they use.
- **Applying and transferring skills.** Teachers and other school and out-of-school staff often fail to use the program strategies in real-time, “teachable moment” situations.

## A Resource Guide to SEL Programs

Partnering with the right SEL program can be key to success with students. Here are the 25 leading SEL and character education programs profiled in *Navigating SEL From the Inside Out*:

1. **The 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution) Program** is a grade-specific Pre-K–5 curriculum that integrates the teaching of social and emotional skills and language arts through the use of diverse children’s literature. Primary focus: 43 percent interpersonal skills. [www.morningside-center.org/node/36](http://www.morningside-center.org/node/36)
2. **Caring School Community (CSC)** is a K–6 program that builds classroom and school community while teaching SEL skills. Primary focus: 78 percent interpersonal skills. [www.collaborativeclassroom.org/caring-school-community](http://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/caring-school-community)
3. **Character First** is a K–12 character education curriculum designed to build positive social values and character by helping students develop a vocabulary of character traits and apply them to life. Primary focus: 71 percent character. [www.characterfirsteducation.com](http://www.characterfirsteducation.com)
4. **Competent Kids, Caring Communities (CKCC)** is a Pre-K–5 program designed to build SEL competencies, increase compassion and connectedness, and strengthen home/school partnerships. Primary focus: 30 percent cognitive regulation. [www.competentkids.org](http://www.competentkids.org)
5. **I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)** is a Pre-K–5 program designed to build interpersonal thinking and problem-solving skills. Primary focus: 65 percent emotional processes and cognitive regulation. [www.icanproblemsolve.info](http://www.icanproblemsolve.info)
6. **Lions Quest** is a Pre-K–12 program that integrates SEL, character education, drug and bullying prevention, and service learning to promote school and life success. Primary focus: 60 percent interpersonal skills. [www.lions-quest.org](http://www.lions-quest.org)
7. **MindUP™** is a Pre-K–12 program that offers a framework and curriculum for SEL designed to be modeled by teachers in the classroom. Primary focus: 44 percent cognitive regulation. [www.mindup.org](http://www.mindup.org)
8. **The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum** is a Pre-K–12 program that combines SEL with humane education, building upon children’s love of animals to promote SEL competence, academic achievement, and awareness of the needs of shelter pets. Primary focus: 56 percent interpersonal skills. [www.education.muttigrees.org](http://www.education.muttigrees.org)
9. **Open Circle** is a K–5 program designed to develop SEL skills and build a school community in which students feel safe, cared for, and engaged in learning. Primary focus: 65 percent interpersonal skills. [www.open-circle.org](http://www.open-circle.org)
10. **The PATHS** program is a Pre-K–6 curriculum designed to reduce aggression and behavioral problems by promoting the development of SEL competence. Primary focus: 75 percent emotional processes. [www.channing-bete.com/paths](http://www.channing-bete.com/paths)
11. **Positive Action** is a Pre-K–12 program that emphasizes the link between thoughts, actions, and feelings to promote positive self-concept alongside character development and SEL. Primary focus: 57 percent emotional processes. [www.positiveaction.net](http://www.positiveaction.net)
12. **RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions)** is a Pre-K–12 approach to SEL that builds emotional intelligence in students and adults and prepares adults to model these skills and create a supportive and healthy climate for students. Primary focus: 94 percent emotional processes. [ei.yale.edu/ruler](http://ei.yale.edu/ruler)

### SEL Program Focus Areas

- Interpersonal Skills
- Character
- Cognitive Regulation
- Emotional Processes
- Mindset

13. **Second Step** is a Pre-K–8 program designed to help children understand and manage their emotions, control their reactions, be aware of others’ feelings, and develop problem-solving and responsible decision-making skills using games, stories, and songs. Primary focus: 52 percent emotional processes. [www.cfchildren.org/second-step](http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step)
14. **SECURe** is a Pre-K–3 program that develops the social-emotional and self-regulatory skills that students need to be effective learners. It includes strategies, routines, and lessons that work together to improve student learning and behavior and build a positive classroom and school climate. Primary focus: 50 percent cognitive regulation. [easel.gse.harvard.edu/secure](http://easel.gse.harvard.edu/secure)
15. **The Social Decision Making/Problem Solving (SDM/PS) Program** is a K–8 program designed to help students develop social awareness, self-control, and decision-making skills. Primary focus: 55 percent interpersonal skills. [ubhc.rutgers.edu/sdm/index.html](http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/sdm/index.html)
16. **Too Good for Violence** is a K–12 violence prevention and character education program that teaches SEL skills, attitudes, and behaviors to help students manage bullying situations, resolve conflicts, and cope with frustration peacefully. Primary focus: 67 percent interpersonal skills. [www.toogoodprograms.org](http://www.toogoodprograms.org)
17. **We Have Skills** is a video-based social skills program for K–3 designed to facilitate positive behavior and learning in the classroom by teaching seven behavioral skills. Primary focus: 59 percent interpersonal skills. [www.irised.com/products/we-have-skills](http://www.irised.com/products/we-have-skills)
18. **Wise Skills** is a K–12 character education and SEL program designed to develop character, social and emotional skills, resilience, grit, and a positive school climate by using the words and lives of diverse historical figures. Primary focus: 52 percent character. [www.wiseskills.com](http://www.wiseskills.com)
19. **Conscious Discipline** is an early childhood SEL program that integrates with classroom management. Primary focus: 75 percent emotional processes. [www.consciousdiscipline.com](http://www.consciousdiscipline.com)
20. **The Good Behavior Game** is a team-based classroom management strategy for early grades that uses positive social reinforcement to promote positive behaviors related to student success. Primary focus: 100 percent interpersonal skills. [www.air.org/topic/p-12-education-and-social-development/good-behavior-game](http://www.air.org/topic/p-12-education-and-social-development/good-behavior-game)
21. **Playworks** is a national nonprofit that leverages the power of play to transform children’s social and emotional health. Primary focus: 49 percent interpersonal skills. [www.playworks.org](http://www.playworks.org)
22. **Responsive Classroom** is a research-based approach to elementary and middle school teaching that focuses on the strong link between academic success and SEL. Primary focus: 34 percent cognitive regulation. [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)
23. **Before the Bullying** is a K–8 universal prevention program designed to prevent bullying and teach positive social skills through the use of music, videos, and the performing arts. Primary focus: 55 percent interpersonal skills. [www.growing-sound.com/music-more-before-the-bullying](http://www.growing-sound.com/music-more-before-the-bullying)
24. **Girls on the Run** is a physical activity-based positive youth development afterschool program for girls in grades 3–8. Primary focus: 49 percent mindset. [www.girlsontherun.org](http://www.girlsontherun.org)
25. **WINGS for Kids** is a K–5 afterschool program that combines traditional elements of afterschool programming with a comprehensive SEL curriculum to promote positive behavior, responsible decision-making, and healthy relationships among students. Primary skill focus: 41 percent emotional processes. [www.wingsforkids.org](http://www.wingsforkids.org) •