

OPINION

Sorry, There's No Easy Toolkit for Social-Emotional Learning. But It's Worth the Work

SEL has an \$11 return on every \$1 investment. So what are we waiting for?

By Marc Brackett & Diana Divecha

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Not long ago the two of us gave a talk to a group of mental-health professionals about the teaching of emotional intelligence. Afterwards, a leading child psychiatrist approached us to applaud our appeal for greater social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools. The psychiatrist added: "We're going to need another 8,000 child psychiatrists in the United States to deal with all of the mental-health problems our children are having."

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"You misunderstood us," Marc responded. "We want to put you all out of business."

The ultimate goal of the SEL field is to weave the teaching of social-emotional intelligence throughout children's education so lives are enhanced and crises are rare. But, as the eminent psychiatrist was pointing out, we have a long way to go.

This winter marks the 30th anniversary of the first scholarly publication on emotional intelligence. In it, Peter Salovey of Yale University and John D. Mayer of the University of New Hampshire challenged the proposition that emotions mostly cloud judgment

and get in the way of rational thought. Instead, Salovey and Mayer said, when we use emotions wisely, we make better decisions and have improved mental health and relationships.

A few years later, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (**CASEL**) was founded to support high-quality, evidence-based SEL as essential curricula from preschool through high school. SEL was formally defined as attitudes and competencies that foster self- and social awareness and the abilities to manage one's own and others' emotions and behavior, make responsible decisions, and nurture positive relationships.

Over the past two decades, research has shown that SEL skills can be taught, and that when schools embed SEL into the school day with fidelity, it improves children's lives, the culture of the school, and even teacher well-being. Schools report increased academic success, enriched relationships between teachers and students, and decreases in aggression. And SEL has been shown to be a financially sound investment: According to a 2015 **cost-benefit analysis**, for every dollar invested in SEL, \$11 were saved from reduced delinquency, substance abuse, and the like.

A January 2019 **report** from the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development concluded that SEL is not an educational fad; it is integral to education. In addition, emotional intelligence is greatly needed in the workplace, say reports from CEOs, the World Economic Forum, and analysts of the future of



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American youths now rank in the bottom quarter of developed nations in global comparisons of well-being and life satisfaction. Suicides among 15- to 19-year-olds have **risen 47 percent** over the past two decades. More than 1 in 3 college freshmen have a diagnosed mental-health condition. School bullying and harassment remain significant problems. Corporal punishment is still allowed in classrooms in 19 states, and suspensions and expulsions are disproportionately applied to black students.

So while the importance of SEL has been formally and informally recognized, its promise has not been fulfilled. Why?

Each year the two of us give dozens of presentations to educators, parents, and business professionals all over the world. When asked to describe their emotional state, three-quarters of the participants have difficulty coming up with a meaningful “feeling word.” And when we ask them for strategies they’ll use to maintain their focus, they are equally at a loss. “I’ll leave my feelings at the door,” they say, or “I’ll drink a lot of coffee.” Or more fashionably, “I’ll be mindful.” Are these strategies useful for someone exhausted at work, a teenager paralyzed with performance anxiety, or a preschooler going through her parents’ grueling divorce?

Despite the field’s firm grounding in science and widespread support for SEL among parents, educators, and students, SEL is not yet taken as seriously as subjects like math or physics. Emotions often are marginalized as a woman’s interest. And they’re frequently viewed as someone else’s issues, not one’s own. When we ask audiences if they need help learning to regulate their emotions, a few people usually raise their hands. If we ask them if the people around them need help regulating their emotions, nearly all the hands go up. It’s also possible that many of us cling to the outdated belief that children require strict discipline, not a focus on their feelings, to attain success in adulthood. This, despite decades of evidence linking harsh discipline to detrimental outcomes, and emotion regulation and interpersonal skills to positive outcomes.

Developing true social-emotional skills is hard and lifelong work, and, regrettably, Americans are attracted to quick fixes—we like to buy SEL kits, have a school assembly, make classroom rules, and move on. But it isn’t enough for educators to attend a workshop, go on retreat, or adopt a school “program” for an hour a week. This is particularly so because the demands on our social-emotional skills are constantly changing, requiring the skills themselves to be dynamic.

More funding is needed to implement

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SEL approaches that achieve the standards that states are adopting. And SEL must be incorporated upstream into preservice teacher training, rather than offered solely as professional development after teachers are already working in the field.



CASEL encourages schools to adopt developmentally sequenced, learner-centered, and culturally relevant SEL approaches with demonstrated positive impacts. The approaches should include explicit training in competencies like emotion recognition, self-regulation, and interpersonal problem-solving for children and the adults interacting with them so they can be effective role models. Two comprehensive approaches to SEL that meet these criteria are PATHS, a SEL curriculum for K-5, and RULER, a pre-K-12 approach to SEL that we helped develop and named for the skills of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions.

Of course, many emotional challenges have roots in systemic social problems like inequality, racism, sexism, and poverty, but we can still improve the ways we deal with the feelings that result. And there will always be a need for child specialists in cases of organically based mental illnesses or severe trauma.

It's time to start acting on the evidence for what really works instead of treating emotional problems that could have been prevented in the first place. Let's address the biases, old-fashioned pedagogies, and ill-informed policies at the school, state, and federal levels that undermine what research shows is best for our children and the adults who are educating them.

Marc Brackett is the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, a professor in the Yale Child Study Center, on the board of directors for CASEL, and author of the 2019 book Permission to Feel (Celadon Books). Diana Divecha is an assistant clinical professor in the Yale Child Study Center and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, and author of the blog Developmental Science.

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