



Building Social and Emotional Skills in Afterschool Programs: A Literature Review

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL)—the skills and attitudes that help us to build relationships, work together, solve problems and regulate emotions—impact our success in our personal, academic and professional lives. While some believe these skills should be taught by parents and families, others believe that incorporating SEL into a child’s education is part of teaching the “whole child” and developing a balanced learner.

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states may decide to account for the SEL occurring in their schools and use that data to make decisions about how to best support schools. For example, some states are considering using SEL indicators, like school climate or student engagement, in their new state accountability systems.

However, dependable methods for accurately measuring social and emotional learning are still being developed. This raises the concern that using potentially faulty SEL measures to assess schools as a part of ESSA won’t serve students well. As such, some parents and policymakers may question whether SEL should be a responsibility for teachers and schools, or is best left to parents and families.

Youth who spend time in afterschool programs may receive additional exposure to social and emotional learning. Afterschool programs can be a natural fit for SEL for a number of reasons: Providers are not bound by curricular requirements; they typically provide opportunities for positive youth development, including personal, social and leadership skills; and they form connections between schools, families and communities. Furthermore, programs aimed at older youth may focus on positive youth-adult relationships and provide opportunities for apprenticeships or other work-related experiences during which SEL skills are developed. In a 2013 study, the majority of workers surveyed reported that they developed most of the skills they use in their current job outside of school.¹

In 2010, researchers Durlak, Weissberg and Pachan reviewed 68 studies in which youth attending an afterschool program with the goal of furthering personal and social development were compared to a nonparticipating control group of youth. The reviewed programs spanned the United States and included both rural and urban settings. They found that afterschool programs using evidence-based practices for SEL were associated with significant improvements in personal and social skills.² The authors compiled these evidence-based practices to form the acronym “SAFE.” They identified SAFE programs as those where the staff’s approach is:

- **Sequential:** Sequenced activities to teach skills
- **Active:** Active learning to practice skills
- **Focused:** Focused time on skill development
- **Explicit:** Explicit targeting of specific skills

Their findings clearly showed that SAFE programs were linked to significant improvements in self-perception, school bonding, positive social behaviors; reductions in behavior problems and drug use; and increases in academic performance and attendance. Since the release of this pivotal study, the field of social and emotional learning has expanded, including an increased focus on SEL in afterschool settings. While there remain significant challenges to measuring the impact of SEL in afterschool programs, several studies have found evidence of their effectiveness in supporting the social and emotional development of participating youth. Effective SEL-focused programs have been found to be associated with improved social behavior, community engagement and service, and decreased behavior problems.³

Since 2010, there have been a number of reports and studies on social and emotional learning in the afterschool setting. To understand the current state of the literature, we reviewed a variety of recent SEL research materials, including research compendiums, case studies, reports and articles. Findings on the impact of SEL in afterschool programs typically center on two main themes: quality programming—including what staffing looks like in a high-quality program—and SEL’s link to career readiness. The following report examines and summarizes the literature and organizes the reports by these themes.

Quality

Not surprisingly, research indicates that high-quality afterschool programs produce greater social and emotional learning benefits than lower-quality programs. *High-quality* programming hinges on well-qualified staff who build positive relationships with youth and intentionally and explicitly build SEL skills.

STAFF

Well-trained staff who build positive relationships with youth was cited as an important quality component in a number of studies. In their review of 25 widely-used SEL programs, researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that the most effective programs emphasize meaningful relationships between adult staff and youth. Furthermore, to create an environment ripe for social and emotional learning, adult staff must be capable of establishing a safe and positive space for youth.⁴

Researchers at Princeton University and the Brookings Institute echoed these findings in their review of afterschool programs that explicitly focus on SEL. In the compendium, “The Future of Children,” researchers point out that afterschool staff are more likely than school-day staff to be closer in age to the youth participating in these programs. They also may have lived in the same neighborhood or had similar experiences in their youth. They concluded that due to these characteristics, afterschool staff can be powerful role models, while creating a sense of belonging and encouraging positive relationships, behavior and attitudes. Positive and caring relationships between afterschool staff and youth are vital to SEL outcomes, researchers claim, and therefore “competent adult staff are the linchpin of effective after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes.”⁵ In order to adequately support afterschool staff, “The Future of Children” researchers claim they must be trained in SEL and have ongoing opportunities for professional development and supervisor evaluations.

In their field guide for afterschool providers, researchers with the Forum for Youth Investment outline standards and curriculum features that were found to be foundational to social and emotional learning in eight high-quality afterschool programs. Among the five curriculum features included in the guide, three target afterschool staff practices or training:

- **Safe Space:** Staff should create a safe, structured environment and culture where youth feel valued and included.
- **Responsive Practices:** Staff should coach and model behavior, and know the participating youth well.
- **Staff Support:** Staff should have time to plan before—and debrief after—each program session, be supported by the organization, and be provided opportunities for professional development.⁶

INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT SEL SKILL-BUILDING

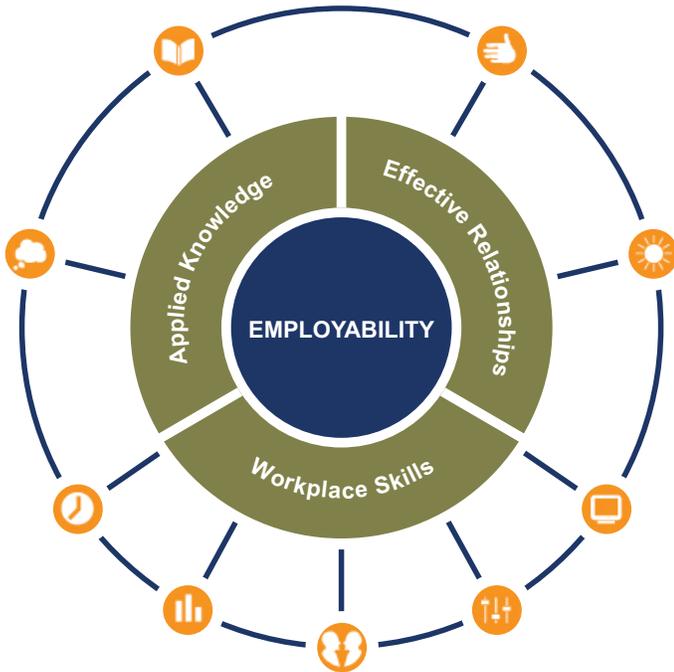
Durlak, Weissberg and Pachan’s research found that effective programs *focused* (F) specific time and attention on SEL skill-building and were *explicit* (E) in naming the skills they were learning (the F and E of SAFE).⁷ Researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education echoed this by including opportunities for “direct skill-building” as one of the core principles for high-quality SEL afterschool programming.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota suggest that while high-quality programs create ideal environments for social and emotional skills to be *caught*, programs that use targeted language and practice specific skills allow such skills to be *taught*. In their brief, they argue that while not every afterschool program must be an “SEL-focused” program, there are still steps all programs can take to be more intentional in promoting SEL.⁸

Career Readiness

The U.S. Department of Education touts employability skills, or skills needed in the workplace, as a crucial component of career readiness. They define employability skills as “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”⁹ Many researchers link SEL with career readiness by demonstrating the overlap between social and emotional and employability skills. For example, reports by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) display the SEL skills framework from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) alongside the employability skills framework from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. Both images (shown below) illustrate the need for interpersonal, communication and critical thinking skills, among other similarities.

Employability Skills Network



Source: U.S. Department of Education

Core Competencies



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, (2015)

In their joint brief, the Committee for Children and CASEL outline the skills employers say they need in future workers and match them to social and emotional skills. They note that SEL begins at home, but suggest that school and afterschool programs play an important role because they are where “children learn how to navigate social relations with peers from diverse backgrounds and build the essential skills that allow them to be productive members of society.”¹⁰ The brief concludes by calling for support for social and emotional learning from policymakers and the business community.

In a recent white paper, researchers at the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) conducted case studies of four communities that aligned their workforce and afterschool systems. They argue that afterschool and workforce systems have common goals, but need to coordinate, develop common language, and leverage funding together to expand services and provide optimal outcomes for youth. AYPF stresses that, even though the cases studies had varying approaches, one of the keys to effectively aligning workforce and afterschool systems is the ability to be responsive to unique community contexts and needs. Additionally, they highlight that since afterschool programs often focus on SEL or STEM, this further positions them as a place to promote career readiness.¹¹

Each of the 50 states has statewide afterschool networks—organizations that foster partnerships and policies to develop, support and sustain high-quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities. The heads of these afterschool networks uniquely sit at the intersection of policy and programming. The Riley Institute at Furman University surveyed them to find out how quality afterschool programs help develop the workforce skills needed in today’s economy. The survey used a comprehensive skills list from the National Network of Business and Industry Associations, along with additional skills from other nationally regarded publications. Survey respondents indicated that the top five workforce readiness skills developed by afterschool programs are teamwork, communication, problem-solving, self-confidence and critical thinking. Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents reported that afterschool programs help grow self-confidence “a lot;” 89 percent reported similar levels of improvement for teamwork skills; and 81 percent reported gains in communication skills.¹²

Lastly, a brief from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) connects employability skills to SEL but states that further evidence is needed to define which practices in afterschool programs are connected to employability skills and workplace readiness. AIR also calls for additional research to determine how afterschool participants actually fare in the workplace and whether afterschool participation helps to close the skills gap for low-income youth.¹³

Conclusion

Researchers conclude that youth are more likely to develop social and emotional skills if they attend an afterschool program with highly qualified staff who have been trained in SEL and with whom they have positive relationships. They also found social and emotional learning to be most effective when programs are intentional and explicit about the skills they are teaching. Additionally, afterschool programs could be positioned well to couple SEL with career readiness.

Here are some of the additional conclusions from various pieces of literature:

- There is generally a disconnect between afterschool and workforce sectors, so effectively aligning these systems, based on community needs, can be beneficial.
- More research is needed linking SEL in afterschool programs to decreased bullying/risky behaviors/underserved populations, as called for by AYPF.¹⁴
- Aligning the SEL curriculum being taught in schools with afterschool programs could maximize its effectiveness.
- There is a need to professionalize the workforce.¹⁵
 - Due to the part-time hours and low wages, the afterschool field often experiences high turnover.
 - Just as there are calls for improving teacher training for SEL in the classroom, the afterschool workforce could benefit from improved and more regular SEL training.¹⁶

Notes

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