



# Essentials

## of **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

**The Complete Guide for Schools and Practitioners**

- Provides a practical and comprehensive look at the evidenced support for SEL in schools and communities
- Examines issues in education that often lead to inequities and create barriers to learning for many students
- Addresses learning from a whole-child perspective and extends the domains of learning beyond that of academic achievement
- Includes the tools needed to guide schools through a multi-phased, systemic approach to whole-school implementation of SEL

**Donna Lord Black**

**Alan S. Kaufman & Nadeen L. Kaufman, *Series Editors***



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*Essentials of Social Emotional Learning (SEL): The Complete Guide for Schools and Practitioners*  
by Donna Lord Black



# Essentials

## of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Complete Guide for Schools and Practitioners

**Donna Lord Black**

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## PREFACE

In the Essentials of Psychological Assessment Series, we have attempted to provide the reader with books that will deliver key practical information in the most efficient and accessible style. Many books in the series feature specific instruments in a variety of domains, such as cognition, personality, education, and neuropsychology. Books like this Essentials of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), focus on crucial topics for professionals who are involved with any aspect of assessment and intervention with school-age children. For the experienced professional, books in the series offer a concise yet thorough review of a test instrument or a specific area of expertise, including numerous tips for best practices. Students can turn to series book for a clear and concise overview of the important assessment tools, and key topics, in which they must become proficient to practice skillfully, efficiently, and ethically in their chosen fields.

Wherever feasible, visual cues highlighting key points are utilized alongside systematic, step-by-step guidelines. Chapters are focused and succinct. Topics are organized for an easy understanding of the essential material related to a particular test or topic. Theory and research are continually woven into the fabric of each book, but always to enhance the practical application of the material, rather than to sidetrack or overwhelm readers. With this series, we aim to challenge and assist readers interested in psychological assessment to aspire to the highest level of competency by arming them with the tools they need for knowledgeable, informed practice. We have long been advocates of “intelligent” testing—the notion that numbers are meaningless unless they are brought to life by the clinical acumen and expertise of examiners. Assessment must be used to make a difference in the child’s life or adult’s life, or why bother to test? All books in the series—whether devoted to specific tests or general topics—are consistent with this credo. We want this series to help our readers, novice, and veteran alike, to benefit from the intelligent assessment approaches of the authors of each book.

In *Essentials of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*, the author captures the essence of why SEL is not only important, but necessary in preparing students for a future that envisages far more than academic achievement. Donn Black— a national expert on SEL, a long-time public servant, and a school practitioner with extensive knowledge and experience in the educational systems— offers a comprehensive approach to SEL that examines the logic for it in schools, the underpinnings of successful implementation (including the role of assessment and data), and the evidence that supports SEL as a positive and sustainable approach to educational reform.

This book is grounded by an exhaustive review of the research and science on SEL, children’s mental health, and the neuroscience of learning. It examines the far-reaching implications of issues that have long plagued our educational systems, including the barriers to learning that have led not only to underachievement, but to gross inequities and injustices as well. The book covers these issues and more, and asserts that SEL can be the great equalizer in education. It offers an approach to SEL that can be implemented in phases that are practical, yet manageable, and are complemented by a complete set of tools and templates to aid in the process. At a time when the world is struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, this book offers a timely examination of the important role SEL will play in schools. As education systems face the challenges of re-engaging students and recovering the learning losses resulting from school closures, the need to integrate SEL with existing school structures has never been greater. With this book, the author provides schools with a realistic and thorough guide for implementing SEL in a way that is meaningful and sustainable.

Alan S. Kaufman, PhD, and  
Nadeen L. Kaufman, EdD  
Series Editors  
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Yale University School of Medicine

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always there for the virtual happy hours and the family game nights because you knew how much they sustained us through these challenging times. Your being there supported me in ways you could not have known. To my nephew Aaron and his fiancée Lyndsey, your interest in my passion for SEL is inspiring and gives me hope for the coming generation. I thoroughly enjoyed our virtual discussions, and I thank you immensely for your support. To my nephew Kyle, just seeing you with your new fiancée during our virtual gatherings reminded me of how important it is to have hope and why this book is so necessary.

This book never would have been possible without the support of friends and colleagues. To my dearest friend and mentor Gail Cheramie, no words can express how much your support has meant to me. You have been there for almost 30 years, first as my professor and now as my dearest friend. If a teacher's success is measured by the success of her student, then I hope I have honored you well. There would not have been successes without you. You have taught me that anything is possible if you *believe* it is possible. Thank you for everything you do for me, and by the way, thank you also for helping review parts of the book. You are a true friend! I also want to thank my dear friend Ginger Gates for her help in reviewing the work. You inspire me every day with your humor and your positive nature, and I am always striving to become a better trainer because of you. You are the best. To Debbie Blackmon, thank you for sharing your knowledge of equine-assisted learning and your applications of SEL to this specialized area. You are an incredible therapist and educator, and I am lucky to have you as a colleague and a friend. To my partner in crime, Angela Downes, I thank you for keeping me grounded and helping me see that the dirt at the end of the road is worth more than a pot of gold. Your co-counsel, Ashton, brought me a breath of fresh air when I needed it the most. To my physical therapist, Monica, and her assistants, Rishi and Courtney, not only did you get me through a tough recovery, you also lifted my spirits and kept me going. Through your relationship-centered approach to therapy and your caring, nurturing environment, you model the principles of SEL every day in the work you do with your patients.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Jeff Manson and Amanda Wynn at Western Psychological Services. Not only did you support me in writing this book, but your belief in SEL and your vision for its future strengthened my commitment, and I am forever grateful. I also want to thank Clark McKown for his willingness to share some of his work in this book. Your expertise in SEL assessment offers support for an area in which schools have a tremendous need, and I truly am grateful for your contributions. Lastly, I want to thank all the wonderful people at Wiley who have helped make this process as painless as possible. For Monica, Darren, and all the editing and production group, you were exceptionally patient in allowing me to work through this at my own pace, and I am especially grateful. Without you, there would be no book.

## INTRODUCTION

The intent of this book is to provide schools and practitioners with a comprehensive overview of SEL and a practical but systematic approach for implementing it in schools. The book also offers suggestions for how local communities can support schools through alignment of efforts and shared accountability. Please note that the information in the book is applicable to individual schools as well as to whole school systems, such as local education systems, state or regional education systems, or national education. Therefore, in the interest of clarity and consistency, the terms *school* and *school systems* are used interchangeably.

SEL is a global concern, so the information provided in this book is grounded in research from around the world. While a large part of the research focuses on schools within the United States, this book strives to offer ideas and information that can be applied to a global audience. Where there are gaps in research or information, there will be limitations to how applicable it is for international purposes. Thus, readers should be mindful of this and use their own judgment in how the information is applied. Nonetheless, the research contained in the book is the latest available at the time of this publication. Given the gaps between research and practice, however, it is expected that more research will be forthcoming and hopefully will expand beyond the United States.



## ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE



This book is accompanied by a companion website:

[www.wiley.com/go/black/essentialsofsel](http://www.wiley.com/go/black/essentialsofsel)



This website includes fillable versions of forms included in the print book for the reader's download and practical use.



## **SECTION I**

# **EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) AS A WORLD PHENOMENON**



## One

# DEFINING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) AND THE CRITICAL AREAS OF COMPETENCE

The realization that social and emotional skills matter as much as, if not more than, academic skills has captured the awareness of schools and communities around the world. Recognition of the critical role these skills play in educating children has swept across the globe and has created a wave of excitement, if not a worldwide phenomenon, that offers a promise of hope for the future of education. As SEL is embraced in schools throughout the world, educators are accepting that this is not simply another trend in education, but is the missing component in how students are educated and prepared for success, not only in school but at home, in the community, in the workforce, and in life. Unapologetically, schools are beginning to expand their focus beyond that of rigor and accountability for academic instruction to an educational program that focuses on the whole child, so that today's students might be better prepared for life's opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges.

While SEL is being embraced by more and more schools, implementation is not without its challenges. One of the biggest challenges is understanding that SEL is more than simply a program. Interest in SEL has risen so sharply that it has spurred the development and availability of a plethora of programs and curricula, along with books, articles, websites, blogs, and a host of other resources. While schools earnestly attempt to address the social and emotional development of their students, the rapid emergence of these pre-scripted programs and curricula (often claiming to offer a complete package for SEL) can be enticing to schools. These programs can sometimes make implementation appear oversimplified and may lead to the use of already limited resources in an

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Companion website: [www.wiley.com/go/black/essentialsofSEL](http://www.wiley.com/go/black/essentialsofSEL)

ineffective and inefficient manner. It is not uncommon, for example, for a school or district to adopt a particular program or strategy to address behavior and classroom management and believe this to be the entire solution for SEL. Implementing this single program not only adds to an already fragmented process, but also places the school at risk of making causal connections between the program and any outcomes, especially if those outcomes have not been successful. In such a case, the school might blame the lack of success on the program rather than considering other factors, such as fidelity of implementation or skill of staff implementing the program, as possible reasons for the lack of success.

Take, for example, *Program XYZ*. Let's assume this hypothetical program uses an application for tablet computers (commonly referred to as "tablets") to improve students' social awareness skills by connecting them to one another through wireless technology. The school obtains a grant and purchases tablets for each student with the program's application installed on each tablet. Teachers and students are trained in how to operate the program and all is well, until they experience repeated failures with maintaining wireless connections between the tablets. Without a stable connection, the program won't operate. Thus, many of the teachers abandon its use. While the problems experienced with the program were related to technology issues (i.e., getting the tablets to communicate with one another) rather than the program itself, the teachers became disheartened and lost interest in the program. Six weeks later, the school principal discovers that a large number of teachers are no longer using the program, claiming it was ineffective. While there clearly was a positive correlation between the teachers' skills in using technology and the program's implementation (i.e., both decreased), this did not prove the program was ineffective. It merely showed that teachers lacked the skills needed for resolving the technology issues, and thus were unsuccessful with implementing the program. The program was abandoned before effectiveness could be evaluated, thus wasting valuable time and resources. In situations like this, schools run the risk of making causal connections between a program and its outcomes when, in fact, the relationship between the two may only have been correlational at best. Therefore, schools may be less likely to pursue other efforts to address these critical areas of need and may have difficulty recognizing that SEL is more than a program.

### CAUTION BOX

Poor program outcomes may not be the fault of the program, but may be due to other factors, such as fidelity of implementation or skill of the staff implementing the program. While there may be correlations between certain factors impacting the program's outcomes, this does not mean these factors *caused* the outcomes.

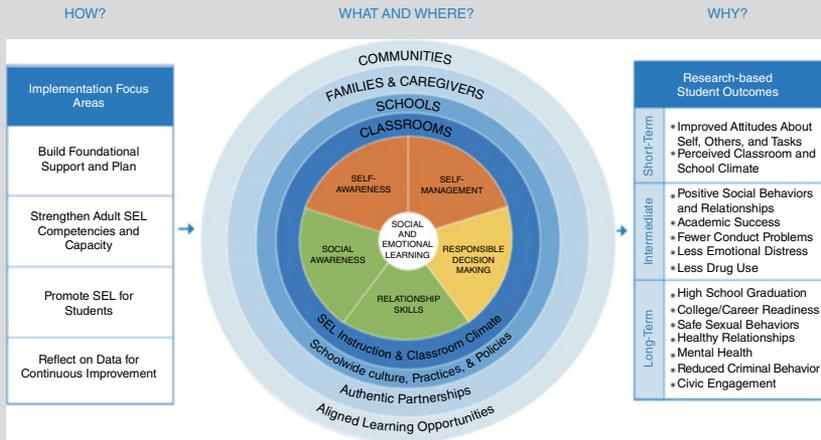
It is important to point out, however, that the vast majority of SEL programs and curricula available to schools are of excellent design and may even be considered *evidence-based practices*. Unfortunately, schools may not have methods or standards developed by which these products can be objectively evaluated, especially with regard to how the product aligns with the school's specific needs. As a result, schools may make purchasing decisions based only on effectiveness claims touted by the products' developers. Without established criteria to guide the selection process, schools are vulnerable to these attractive claims and may expend valuable resources without thoroughly reviewing whether the product complements and supports their existing efforts or if it duplicates (in whole or in part) those efforts. Questions—about how the product was developed, whether the developer applied scientific methods and principles in its development, and if field testing included a broad and diverse group of students—often go unanswered.

If this weren't challenging enough for schools, they also must face other obstacles to implementation, such as gaining buy-in and support from administration or staff who may not understand the full benefits of SEL. Many educators believe that adding SEL to a teacher's plate of responsibilities is more than should be expected, given the numerous demands and accountability measures already required of them. What they struggle to recognize is that SEL is not another "add-on" program. Rather, it is a systemic process that can ultimately strengthen the teachers' plates.

SEL is not and never has been touted as a program that takes away from or supplants academic instruction. On the contrary, it has always been promoted as a process for enhancing instruction and improving the learning environment, and when implemented with fidelity, it contributes to improved outcomes for students and for the systems that serve them. Until educators recognize and accept that the benefits of SEL far outweigh the challenges of implementation, there will continue to be resistance.

There also may be obstacles to acquiring funding and resources, as well as to developing a SEL curriculum. Perhaps one of the most critical and often less recognized obstacles, however, is the need for staff training in SEL. Staff knowledge and skills in SEL are fundamental to a sustainable approach to implementation, but these are areas that are frequently overlooked. What are the knowledge and skills needed by staff? While there are a multitude of frameworks identifying critical social and emotional skills, the framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL 2017) is the framework most widely adopted by schools. The competencies identified by CASEL address five key areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. A graphic illustration of the framework and a detailed description of the competencies are provided in Rapid Reference 1.1.

# Rapid Reference 1.1 CASEL's SEL Framework



Source: Core SEL Competencies, from CASEL. © 2017, CASEL.

## The CASEL 5:

### Self-awareness

The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.

Examples:

- Integrating personal and social identities
- Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets
- Identifying one's emotions
- Demonstrating honesty and integrity
- Linking feelings, values, and thoughts
- Examining prejudices and biases
- Experiencing self-efficacy
- Having a growth mindset
- Developing interests and a sense of purpose

### Self-management

The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the

capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals.

Examples:

- Managing one's emotions
- Identifying and using stress management strategies
- Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation
- Setting personal and collective goals
- Using planning and organizational skills
- Showing the courage to take initiative
- Demonstrating personal and collective agency

### **Social awareness**

The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Examples:

- Taking others' perspectives
- Recognizing strengths in others
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion
- Showing concern for the feelings of others
- Understanding and expressing gratitude
- Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones
- Recognizing situational demands and opportunities
- Understanding the influences of organizations and systems on behavior

### **Relationship skills**

The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.

Examples:

- Communicating effectively
- Developing positive relationships
- Demonstrating cultural competency
- Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem solving
- Resolving conflicts constructively
- Resisting negative social pressure
- Showing leadership in groups

Seeking or offering support and help when needed  
 Standing up for the rights of others

### **Responsible decision making**

The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

Examples:

- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems
- Learning to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts
- Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions
- Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school
- Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being
- Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts

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The degree to which teachers have knowledge and skills in these competencies is an area where concern is warranted, given that teacher-preparation programs traditionally have not incorporated SEL into their curriculum. Likewise, many state certification requirements do not include knowledge and skills in SEL.

A recent study of teacher preparation programs in the United States was conducted by the University of British Columbia's Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and Special Education. The study scanned teacher education programs in colleges of education throughout the United States. The purpose of the scan was to examine what states require teachers to know about SEL for certification and what institutions of higher education actually teach these teachers. Results of the study showed that while all states require some level of SEL knowledge and skills for teacher certification, none of the states require knowledge and skills in all five of the SEL competencies. Greater than half of the states require teachers to have knowledge in teaching three of the SEL competencies—self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making—but less emphasis was placed on the SEL competencies of self-awareness and social awareness. While most pre-service programs fell short of providing comprehensive training in SEL, there were three exemplary programs identified in the report (Schonert-Reichl, Kital, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017). These are described in Rapid Reference 1.2.

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