



# Understanding and Cultivating Social Emotional Learning



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# What helps a child thrive?

Young people's success in life depends on more than just academic knowledge and test scores. Educators understand that a child's mindsets, skills, and habits are incredibly important for school success. Outside the classroom, employers are looking for hard-working team players who effectively manage projects, interact with demanding clients, solve problems creatively, and exhibit leadership.

In recent years, policymakers and researchers alike have begun to place increasing importance on the development of a child's "nonacademic skills." These are sometimes called soft skills, noncognitive skills, workplace essential skills, 21st century skills, social emotional development, or mindsets, essential skills, and habits (MESH). We refer to them here as social emotional learning (SEL).

We are in an era of increasing studies, reports, white papers, and frameworks about SEL. We created this document to be an easy-to-read, basic research-based primer for our partners that are just beginning to think in new ways about SEL. We hope that teachers, coaches, afterschool staff, and employers can use this resource to facilitate conversations about how young people can reach their full potential by developing nonacademic skills.

# Belonging

**What is it?** Belonging is feeling connected to others and perceiving oneself as an accepted and valued group member.

**Why is it important?** Although it may seem basic, fostering a sense of belonging is incredibly important to the success of a youth program or school environment. Research shows that students who do not feel as if they belong—feeling rejected or excluded—are more likely to be aggressive, withdrawn, disinterested in school, and even drop out. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging show more motivation and better objective performance, and are more likely to be well-adjusted. In the workplace, belonging can help employees increase productivity and prevent burnout.

**How can it be cultivated?** A sense of belonging can be enhanced by adults intentionally building community, connecting individuals, and sharing their belief in the students. Additional techniques include making it clear that diverse perspectives are valued and welcomed, emphasizing cooperative learning, sharing decision-making, and providing everyone with opportunities to have valued roles. A sense of belonging can also be developed by emphasizing that everyone worries about fitting in and it's normal to feel out of place from time to time.



# Positive Identity Development

**What is it?** Positive identity development is understanding and valuing one's sense of self. For most students, positive identity development relates specifically to their own race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, among other characteristics.

**Why is it important?** How people define themselves influences their values, behaviors, and choices. Positive identity matters because research has shown it is linked to better well-being, less stress and delinquency, and increased confidence in one's ability to succeed.

**How can it be cultivated?** Positive identity can be developed with culturally responsive practices that reflect a student's identity and experience. Adults can also be trained in antibullying strategies and techniques to build an inclusive climate. Particularly helpful is focusing efforts on cultural competence and relevance and providing opportunities for students to practice bridging differences between diverse identities in a safe environment.

*I have a strong  
sense of who I am  
and feel proud of  
my identity*



# Interpersonal Skills

**What is it?** Interpersonal skills are the abilities to effectively cooperate, communicate, and manage conflict with others.

**Why is it important?** Interpersonal skills are considered highly desirable key business skills, but they are also important in the classroom. Interpersonal skills matter because research has linked these skills to achievement, although this link is likely indirect (i.e., increased interpersonal skills promote social connections, which in turn facilitate performance).

**How can it be cultivated?** Interpersonal skills can be developed by modeling a range of positive interpersonal behaviors (e.g., how to start a conversation, how to apologize after hurting someone, how to cope with anger and avoid aggression) and then allowing young people the chance to practice appropriate behaviors with reinforcement for positive actions.

*'respect and work  
well with people  
around  
me'*



# Emotional Competence

**What is it?** Emotional competence is the ability to recognize, regulate, and positively express one's emotions. These skills and others such as self-control are often described collectively as "self-management skills."

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**Why is it important?** While emotional competence is highly valued in the workplace, it also is important in academic achievement. Research has linked higher emotional competence to improved achievement (even after accounting for intelligence) and higher quality student-teacher relationships.

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**How can it be cultivated?** Emotional competence can be developed by specifically teaching students emotion regulation and coping strategies (e.g., mindfulness, meditation, yoga, deep breathing) and allowing space for students to practice these techniques (e.g., group meditation sessions).



*I manage my  
emotions and  
express them  
constructively*

# Future Orientation

**What is it?** Future orientation is the ability to envision a positive future beyond adolescence, set long-term goals, and monitor progress towards those goals, combined with the hope that the goals can be met.

**Why is it important?** Future orientation matters because research has shown that young people who set goals and are supported in believing those goals are attainable have higher achievement and well-being, which is due in part to increased positive behaviors (i.e., completing homework) and decreased problem behavior (i.e., absences and disruptive behavior).

**How can it be cultivated?** Future orientation can be developed by helping youth to connect their short-term goals with their long-term goals. Adults can support students in envisioning their positive possible selves that are attainable, along with helping them map out the discrete steps it will take to become that person.

*I feel hopeful about my future and can plan what to do to reach my goals*



# Growth Mindset

**What is it?** Growth mindset is the belief that intelligence and ability are not innate, unchangeable qualities, but rather can continually be developed through effort and hard work.

**Why is it important?** Growth mindset matters because research shows young people who naturally endorse a growth mindset or receive a growth mindset intervention show better academic performance and persistence. Possibly, this is because students who believe they can grow their abilities are more motivated and more likely to persist when they encounter difficulties. Research has shown that a growth mindset in the workplace builds more ownership, innovation, and positive feelings like trust and commitment.

**How can it be cultivated?** Growth mindset can be developed when students are explicitly taught that the brain can grow, and when they receive process praise (e.g., "Wow, you found a good way to solve that!") instead of person praise (e.g., "Wow, you're so smart!").

*With hard work,  
I can get smarter  
and learn new  
things*



# Perseverance

**What is it?** Perseverance (and related qualities like self-control, grit, and tenacity) is the tendency to stay focused on goals in the face of distractions and in spite of obstacles and setbacks.

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**Why is it important?** Employers and teachers alike understand the importance of perseverance! Perseverance matters because research shows this quality is linked to academic achievement; in some cases, more so than intelligence or ability. Students who have greater perseverance tend to earn higher grades and are more likely to graduate from college.

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**How can it be cultivated?** Perseverance can be encouraged when students' likelihood of succeeding is supported by teaching students effective learning strategies, presenting tasks in ways that make it clear success is attainable and expected, and helping students develop strategies to recover and learn from obstacles.

*I finish  
whatever I  
begin and I  
don't give  
up easily*



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If this primer piqued your interest in social emotional learning, we suggest that you:

- **Learn more about SEL.** Education Northwest can help you deepen your knowledge and find appropriate tools.
- **Strengthen your practice.** Work with our team to map the experiences you provide for youth, and see how they align with SEL-promoting practices.
- **Begin to measure SEL.** There are many different options for SEL measurement, and our research team can provide guidance and support for using SEL data to improve program practices.

Education Northwest is a nonprofit that works with practitioners, policymakers, and community members to transform teaching and learning through research and development, technical assistance, and training services and products. The Institute for Youth Success is a division of Education Northwest that supports youth-serving organizations.

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