

# Social & Emotional Competence in Early Childhood

**Social and emotional learning (SEL)** is the *process through which children and adults acquire cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that enable them to establish and maintain positive healthy relationships.*

**Self-awareness** describes the ability to accurately recognize how you feel and how those feelings influence your behavior. For a preschool-aged child this will include learning new words to describe how he feels and the antecedents of those feelings. Additionally, children of this age are developing a sense of self that will include likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses.

**Self-management** describes the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations, and to set and work toward short and long-term goals. Some young children may be very aware of how they are feeling, but most will still be learning how to control the expression of and reaction to those feelings. At this age children are actively learning about social norms for behavior in different situations (social awareness - below) and how to regulate their behavior and emotional expression to match those expectations.

**Social awareness** describes the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others and the knowledge of what behavior is socially acceptable in different situations (e.g., different rules about laughing loudly in the classroom, on the playground, and at church). Through interactions with peers and caregivers, children learn how to interpret others' facial and bodily expressions of emotion and come to understand that others may feel differently from them.



*The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*

**Relationship skills** allow the individual to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships. Preschoolers are learning what it means to be a good friend; how to offer help, cooperate, and share; and how to negotiate simple conflicts. As with many of these competencies, developing relationships skills requires several other emerging skills, particularly social awareness.

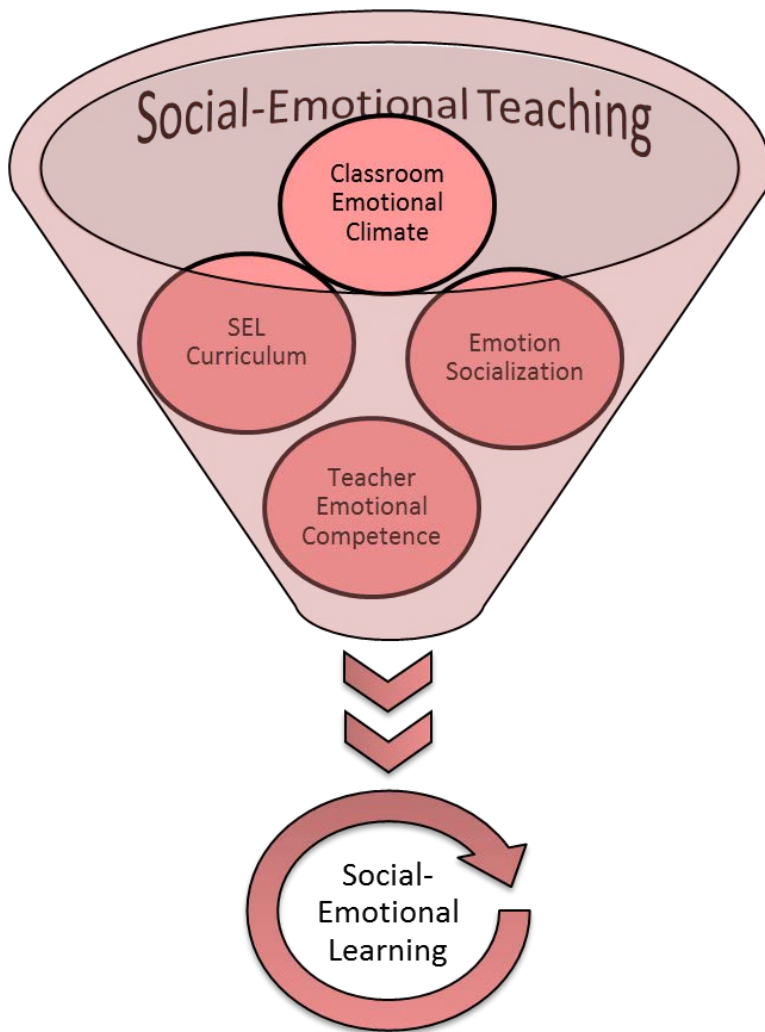
**Responsible decision making** refers to children's ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior. From making choices based on personal opinions (e.g., what area of the classroom to play in) or rules (e.g., how to respond to someone taking your toy) children in preschool can begin to weigh the consequences of various actions, especially with the help of a caregiver.

**Kate Zinsler, Ph.D.**  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Department of Psychology  
[setl.psch.uic.edu](http://setl.psch.uic.edu)

**UIC**

**Social Emotional  
Teaching & Learning Lab**

# Social-Emotional Teaching



## SEL Curricula – a great start!

CASEL identified seven SElect programs/curricula as particularly strong ways to support children's SEL because they are well-designed, provide opportunities for practice, offer multi-year programming, include high-quality training and other implementation supports, and are evidence-based. To read more about these programs, check out <http://casel.org/guide/>.

## Emotion Socialization – You may not even know you're doing it!

Educators (and parents) intentionally or unintentionally socialize children's emotional competence through their daily interactions.

- They directly **teach** children emotion language and regulation techniques and help them interpret others' emotional cues.
- They **model** emotional expressiveness and regulation, which implicitly teaches children which emotions are acceptable in each context.
- Through their **contingent reactions** (dismissing, validating, punishing, etc.) to children's emotions, adults encourage or discourage children's emotional expression.
- Above all, teachers can socialize children's emotional competence by **being a consistent positive competent presence** in children's lives. Your own emotional well-being is an incredibly strong force in the lives of children.

## Building Adult Social-Emotional Competence

There are many small steps you can take to build your own competence and enhance your social-emotional teaching.

**Take care of yourself** – Your own physical and emotional health are critical! Studies show that meditation and mindfulness classes can decrease teachers' experiences of stress and burnout. Check out the association for Mindfulness in Education <http://www.mindfuleducation.org/>

**Practice what you preach** – adopt a few routines and strategies for regulating your own negative emotions when they arise at work or at home. Maybe start with the simple ones you want your students to use: take a deep breath, count backwards from 10, etc.

**Examine your workspace** – what can you do to make your classroom a positive (frustration free) place to work, learn, and play? The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations suggests several simple tips: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>

**Don't go it alone** – Successful SEL requires integrated support at all levels. Seek out mentoring and support from your supervisors and reflect on your classroom practice with co-workers. Building your own competencies will take time, so be patient with yourself

## Supporting Social-Emotional Teaching & Learning as an Administrator

One of the greatest ways to enhance social-emotional learning in your school is to have an administrator who consistently communicates its importance to all members of the staff.

Administrators can do this both by providing structural supports of SET, and through their formal and informal interactions with staff, families, and students.

If you're an administrator hoping to enhance children's SEL in your program or school, consider adding some of the following resources:

- ✓ *SEL curriculum and assessments*
- ✓ *Mental health consultants*
- ✓ *Regular professional development about SEL*
- ✓ *Coaching and feedback for teachers specifically about their SET*
- ✓ *A school library with storybooks focused on emotions and social skills*

If you already have some of those resources, what could you do to encourage teachers to make more frequent or better use of them?

How do you otherwise ensure that teachers know that you value SEL and want them to invest time in it?