

## Background

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions”<sup>1</sup>. Although SEL is important at all ages, it is especially important for children and youth. SEL creates safe learning environments where children are free to ask questions, understand their feelings, connect, and interact with each other<sup>3</sup>. It prepares children to be successful students and citizens by highlighting the importance of collaboration and work ethic, while building essential life skills.

### The 5 key components that make up SEL are:

- ❖ **Social awareness:** The capacity to understand another person's perspective and empathize with others from various cultures, contexts, and backgrounds (recognizing others’ strengths, recognizing social norms).
- ❖ **Self-awareness:** The capacity to recognize one's emotions, morals, and thoughts, and identify how they influence behavior (being honest, identifying strengths and weaknesses, etc.).
- ❖ **Relationship skills:** The skills to build and maintain healthy relationships with diverse groups and contexts (turn taking, empathy, communication skills, etc.).
- ❖ **Self-management:** The capacity to regulate one's emotions, actions, and thoughts across various contexts (ex: focusing on your breathing, when you notice that you are being short because you are stressed).
- ❖ **Responsible decision-making:** The capacity to make effective decisions about personal behaviors and social interactions across various contexts (considering multiple perspectives, understanding that actions have consequences, etc.).

Figure 1 – SEL Competencies

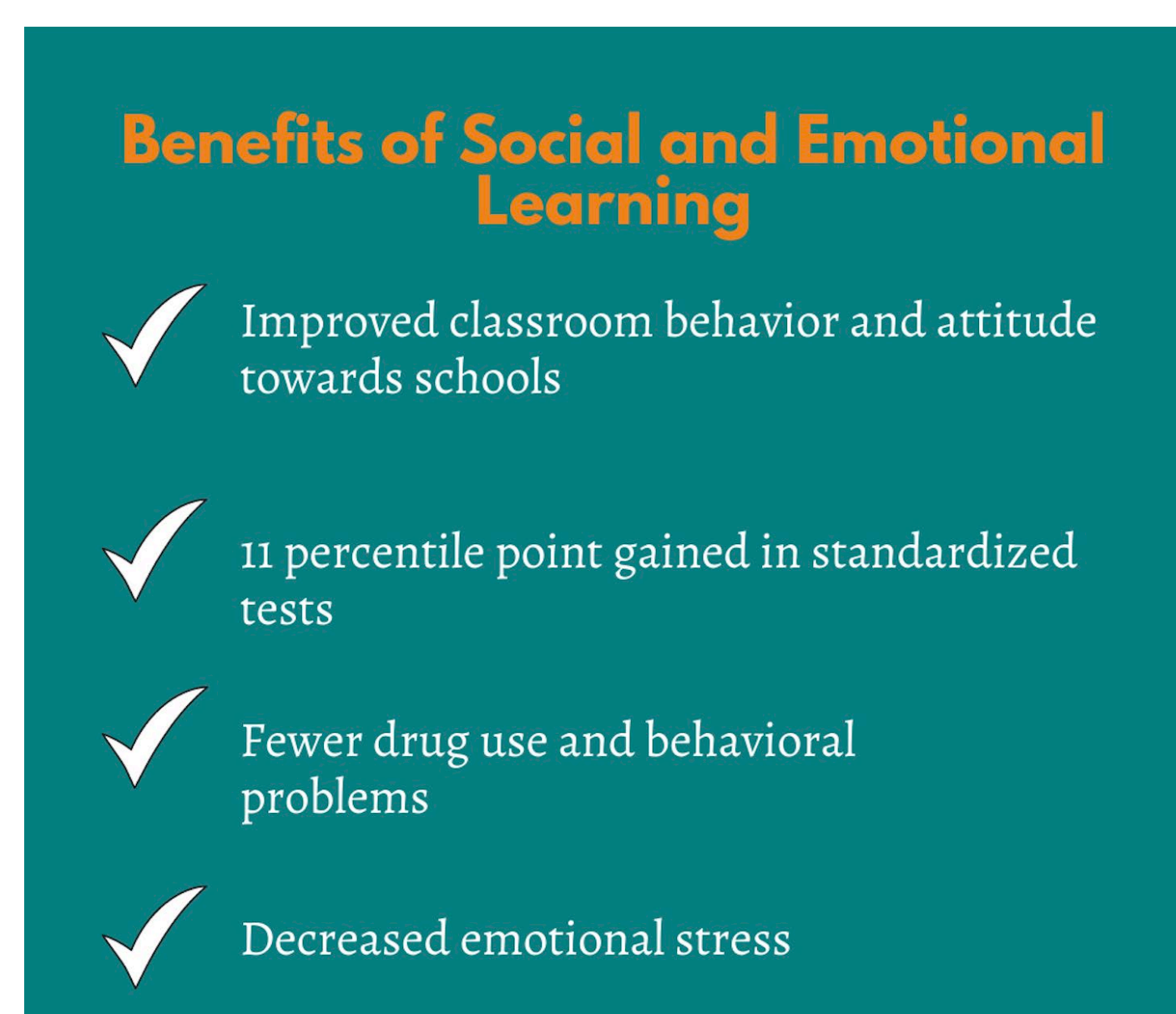


Promoting SEL takes time and effort, but this process is time well spent. For every dollar invested in social and emotional learning, there is an \$11 return<sup>3</sup>. Investing time, money, and effort in supporting social and emotional learning helps to set children up for a successful future.

### SEL in 2021

In the past few years, it has become increasingly evident how important promoting these competencies in youth really is. Research shows that student’s anxiety, substance abuse, and behavioral problems have declined due to the benefits of SEL<sup>1</sup>. When the COVID-19 virus started spreading, social distancing and isolation were necessary in order to keep everyone safe. With schools, extracurriculars, and parks shutting down, children lost access to several rich learning environments. Moreover, it limited the access to safe environments for children to express their emotions, connect with others, and build relationships. Research shows that an unsettled child is likely to have trouble in building connections with others and having the mental capacity for critical thinking<sup>6</sup>. With increased health precautions, isolation, and fear of the unknown, there were several components that could contribute to feelings of uneasiness. SEL has become increasingly important after the pandemic as building personal connections face-to-face is something that many children haven't practiced for over a year<sup>2</sup>. Navigating through a time of the unknown can be extremely emotionally taxing on children and youth. Prioritizing SEL in all aspects of a child’s life will give youth safe places to address their emotions, build skills for SEL, and serve as a key protective factor in combating the detrimental affects the pandemic had on youth.

Figure 2 – Benefits of SEL<sup>3</sup>



## Methods & Procedures

### Environmental Scan

An environmental scan is an ongoing process of collecting information about an organization’s resources, relationships, and effectiveness with their internal and external environments.<sup>7</sup> Environmental scans help organizations gather information on how to improve their methods to best actualize their mission.

An environmental scan was conducted to find out what SEL resources are available and being accessed by parents, caregivers, professionals and community members including classes, videos, handouts, etc. The scan specifically researched resources and available support in the areas of learning about SEL, the benefits of promoting SEL, activities to help further SEL, current efforts of integrating SEL into children’s environments, and recommended programs. Making sure there are quality resources for parents and caregivers about SEL ensures that they are equipped to teach their children social and emotional skills. This environmental scan is being used in tandem with a needs assessment to understand how to help parents and caregivers promote their child’s SEL.

### Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is a method of determining a strategic plan needed in order to accomplish the project’s goals<sup>5</sup>. Needs assessments often consist of some type of survey to understand what resources, services, or other information the target audience requires. A needs assessment, consisting of two surveys, was designed to gauge parents and caregivers’ knowledge and beliefs about SEL practices. This assessment will help to better understand the extent of adults’ interest in promoting SEL and their level of comfort in supporting these skills in children. Through collecting this information, we are also raising awareness about the field of SEL and its importance. These needs assessments will be disseminated through MSU Extension staff networks to stakeholders, collaborators, participants and communities. The results of the needs assessments will provide insight into people’s current understanding of and familiarity with SEL, the gap in accessibility to SEL resources, and support and resources being utilized related to SEL.

### Why it’s important

In order to support social and emotional learning in youth, parents and caregivers must understand what it is and how to help promote it.

## Results & Discussion

The data collected from the survey will help determine what areas we need to focus on educating and engaging parents and caregivers in the SEL agenda. Supporting SEL is important in all contexts, but especially in MSU Extension. The mission of MSUE is to help people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses. In order to effectively support the community’s needs, must understand their needs and identity. Promoting SEL aids in cultivating these strong relationships between MSU Extension and Michigan communities on multiple levels. With the data from the needs assessment, we will be able to improve our current programs as well as identify what other resources are needed to help educate the community.

## Potential Outcomes

- Increased social awareness
- Equipping our future generations with the skills to be responsible and kind citizens
- Promote positive mental health
- Understanding where there are gaps in knowledge and beliefs about SEL practices and the importance of promoting it in youth
- New curricula or resources

## Possible Limitations

- *Skewed Sample Group:* Individuals more knowledgeable in SEL may choose to take the survey as opposed to those who are unfamiliar.
- *Invalid Survey Responses:* Individuals could falsely disclose their confidence about their knowledge and beliefs about SEL and their level of comfort and interest in moving the SEL agenda.

## Further Directions

The needs assessment is still ongoing. At the moment, we are not able to describe parents or caregiver’s opinions of the effectiveness of the existing trainings and resources. Work on the needs assessment is anticipated to continue throughout the Fall of 2021 where we will hopefully collect the necessary data to make conclusions about the effectiveness of the current resources as well as the gaps. The data collected will be used to determine what resources still need to be created to aid the community in the understanding and implementation of efforts supporting SEL for children and youth.

## Conclusions

Overall, it is clear from research that promoting SEL throughout a child’s development is beneficial to their mental health, academic, and life success. With the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, incorporating SEL in all environments of children’s lives is an essential aspect of their positive development. Developing a child’s SEL skills is not only a protective factor in the present, but also an investment in their future.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). *SEL is...* Retrieved from <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

<sup>2</sup>Meyer, D. (n.d.). *How Should Social Emotional Learning Change Post-Pandemic?* N.p.: Elmhurst University. Retrieved from <https://www.elmhurst.edu/blog/social-emotional-learning/>

<sup>3</sup>Michigan Department of Education. (2020). *The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning: What Is SEL?* Retrieved from [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SEL\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_719830\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SEL_Fact_Sheet_719830_7.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>National Education Association. (2021). *Social-Emotional Learning Should Be Priority During COVID-19 Crisis.* Retrieved from <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/social-emotional-learning-should-be-priority-during-covid-19>

<sup>5</sup>O'Donnell, E. (n.d.). *Seven Steps for Conducting a Successful Needs Assessment.* N.p.: National Institute for Children's Health Quality.

<sup>6</sup>Pate, C. (2020). *Strategies for trauma-informed distance learning.* [Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd]. WestEd. Retrieved from [https://selcenter.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/SEL\\_Center\\_Strategies\\_for\\_Trauma\\_Informed\\_Distance\\_Learning\\_Brief.pdf](https://selcenter.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/SEL_Center_Strategies_for_Trauma_Informed_Distance_Learning_Brief.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Edison State University. (2021). *Environmental Scanning.* Retrieved from <https://www.tesu.edu/about/tir/environmental-scanning>