



SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EMOTION COPING SKILLS

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Critical Gaps in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs

The COVID-19 pandemic and current children's mental health crisis have magnified the critical role that schools have in delivery of efficient and effective supports. More than two-thirds (68%) of public elementary schools report increases in the percentage of students who have sought school mental health services since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Few school administrators, however, report being able to effectively provide those services.¹

One potential solution to this misalignment of need and resources is universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, which can serve as proactive and preventive options to support students' positive social and emotional development.² Various definitions of SEL exist, but generally encompass (1) explicitly teaching specific skills through direct instruction, (2) improving classroom and school climate by improving teacher practices and school norms and expectations, or (3) influencing student mindsets such as their perceptions of themselves, others, and school.² Despite controversy reported in the media, parents overwhelmingly endorse support for shared responsibility across home and school for teaching children these important life skills.^{3,4}

An important step to identifying opportunities to teach these critical life skills is understanding the current landscape of SEL program content. The EASEL Project at Harvard University recently mapped 33 of the most common social and emotional learning programs to identify which areas of SEL are taught.² Jones and colleagues identified six key domains of SEL: social, emotional, and cognitive skills, as well as mindsets related to identity, values, and perspectives. The vast majority of programs (84.8%) allocated more than half of their lessons to social skills. This is in stark contrast to the attention given to emotion skills: less than one-fourth of programs (21.2%) dedicated more than half of their lessons to emotion skills.

When emotion skills are taught, existing SEL programs focus on teaching emotional expression, but often overlook the necessary emotion skills of **emotion regulation, empathy, and perspective taking**. Table 1 shows current SEL programs that dedicate the highest percentage of lessons devoted to teaching emotion skills. Programs direct substantial attention to teaching emotional knowledge and expression (Column 3), with far less to teaching emotional and behavioral regulation or empathy and perspective taking. This missing instruction is problematic in that developing emotional regulation skills at young ages can have positive, cascading effects resulting in improved social skills, friendships, peer acceptance, and greater emotion regulation through middle childhood.^{1,5}

Existing SEL programs often overlook the necessary emotion skills of emotion regulation, empathy, and perspective taking.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, students with strong emotion regulation skills demonstrate increased academic achievement.^{6,7}

Table 1. Percentage of Activities in Each Program Targeting Emotional Skills

Program	Emotion skills	Emotional knowledge/ expression	Emotional/ behavioral regulation	Empathy & perspective taking
RULER	91%	71%	33%	15%
Kimochis	63%	59%	22%	18%
PATHS	61%	53%	21%	17%
Conscious Discipline	58%	46%	36%	5%
Feel Your Best Self	100%	69%	62%	31%

Note. Activities may target more than one skill. With the exception of FYBS, data gathered from Jones et al. (2021).

Connecticut's K-3 SEL standards evidence similar gaps. Of Connecticut's SEL standards focused on emotion skills, 39% focus on emotional knowledge/expression, only 22% focus on emotional or behavioral regulation, and 39% focus on empathy and perspective taking.⁸

Users of SEL programs must understand how content is distributed. SEL instruction should include opportunities to gain emotion skills that facilitate navigating everyday interactions, managing behavioral responses to emotionally-charged situations, and building positive relationships across settings.

Filling the Gap in Emotion Coping Skills: One Local Solution

Created at the University of Connecticut, [Feel Your Best Self](#) (FYBS) is a freely accessible online toolkit that offers 12 simple, evidence-informed emotion-focused coping strategies.⁹ Targeting elementary-aged children, FYBS uniquely incorporates puppetry in learning the strategies, bringing fun, choice, and creativity to the classroom. FYBS can be integrated with existing SEL programs or as a stand-alone curriculum in both classroom and out-of-school settings. Since its release in 2022, FYBS has been used around the world, with over 115,000 views of the FYBS strategy videos and 30,000 material downloads. FYBS has received national media attention from [Edutopia](#), National Public Radio's [Morning Edition](#), and [Scripps News](#). FYBS teaches important life skills of emotional regulation, empathy, and perspective taking.

Paths Forward to Support Children's Emotion Coping

The children's mental health crisis requires innovative, highly usable responses. Legislators can support shared responsibility through the following actions:

1. **Advocate for universal SEL programming.** Understand the rationale and urgency for programming that reaches all children, building language to articulately respond to current controversies. See Tyner (2021) for an introduction.
2. **Ensure quality and comprehensiveness of SEL instruction and standards.** SEL instruction and standards should include critical life skills in emotion coping. Based on our review, many existing SEL programs do not sufficiently target these emotion skills.
3. **Write SEL policy with focus on usability.** Complex and unfunded mandates are difficult to implement and sustain, often failing to achieve intended outcomes. Solutions should emphasize usability, such as through accessible resources like FYBS.

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Disclosures: Dr. Sandra Chafouleas and Emily Wicks are co-inventors of the Feel Your Best Self (FYBS) intellectual property owned by the University of Connecticut, and are co-Chief Executive Officers with FYBS & Co. Dr. Sandra Chafouleas and Emily Wicks also have an equity interest (stock) in FYBS & Co.

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¹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, School Pulse Panel 2021-22. <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>.

² Jones, S. M., Brush, K.E., Ramirez, T., Mao, Z. X., Marenus, M., Wettje, S., Finney, K., Raisch, N., Podoloff, N., Kahn, J., Barnes, S., Stickle, L., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Cuartas, J., & Bailey, R. (2021). Navigating SEL from the inside out: Looking inside and across 33 leading SEL programs – a practical resources for schools and OST providers. The EASEL Lab, Harvard University. Retrieved August 15, 2023 from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/navigating-social-and-emotional-learning-from-the-inside-out-2ed.pdf>

³ Tyner, A. (2021). How to Sell SEL: Parents and the Politics of Social-Emotional Learning Suggested Citation for This Report. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/20210811-how-sell-sel-parents-and-politics-social-emotional-learning.pdf>

⁴ Emily Tate Sullivan. (2022, September 30). *Demystifying Social-Emotional Learning and the Controversy Surrounding It*. EdSurge; EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2022-09-30-demystifying-social-emotional-learning-and-the-controversy-surrounding-it>

⁵ Blair, B. L., Perry, N. B., O'Brien, M., Calkins, S. D., Keane, S. P., & Shanahan, L. (2015). Identifying developmental cascades among differentiated dimensions of social competence and emotion regulation. *Developmental Psychology*, 51(8), 1062–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039472>.

⁶ Graziano, P. A., Reavis, R. D., Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D. (2007). The role of emotion regulation and children's early academic success. *Journal of School Psychology*, 45(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.002>

⁷ Supervía & Robres, (2021). Emotional regulation and academic performance in the academic context: The mediating role of self-efficacy in secondary education students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(11), 5715. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115715>.

⁸ Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, the Harvard Graduate School of Education. (n.d.). *Explore SEL: Compare Skill Focus Across Frameworks*. <http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/compare-domains/>

⁹ Koslouski, J. B., Iovino, E. A., & Chafouleas, S. M. (Revision under review). Feel Your Best Self: Insights from Elementary Teachers' Use in Teaching Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies.