

# The Adolescent Brain: Social and Emotional Learning Explained

This briefing paper is **part of a series** produced by Mentor-ADEPIS to support the delivery of effective alcohol and drug education and prevention in schools and other settings.

## About Mentor

Mentor promotes best practice around building young people's resilience in order to prevent alcohol and drug misuse.

## About ADEPIS

The Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service (ADEPIS) is a platform for sharing information and resources aimed at schools and other professionals working in drug and alcohol prevention. In 2017, ADEPIS was recognised by UNESCO, UNODC and WHO as a 'prime example' of best practice in alcohol and drug education.

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**This extended briefing paper forms part of a mini-series on the 'Brain under Construction'. It is intended to be read alongside the other papers in the series (available on the Mentor UK website).**

In previous briefing papers, we have looked at the physical and behavioral structure of the brain and its role in collecting, transferring and processing information. We have also discussed, why our brains are geared-up to learn from the day we are born, and the neurobiological reasons why a carer, teacher or youth leader plays a similar role to that of a parent in shaping the child and adolescent brain. This paper looks at the brain as a social organ that needs both physical and social 'connection' and stimulation to survive. Research has found that close, supportive relationships stimulate positive emotions, neuroplasticity, and learning. This leads us to consider the critical importance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Put simply, SEL is about helping children and young people develop their emotional awareness, thinking and behaviour so they can lead successful lives.

## Background

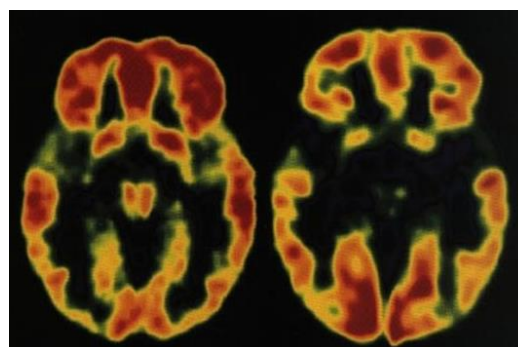
The term 'Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)' was first coined in 1994. It emerged from a meeting in Michigan comprising of various stakeholders involved in the positive development of children. The meeting addressed a concern about ineffective school programming and a lack of coordination among programmes at the school level. Schools were being inundated with a vast number of positive youth development programmes such as drug prevention, violence prevention, sex education, civic education, and moral education, to name a few. To address the needs of young people and help align and coordinate school programmes and programming, the stakeholders decided on the SEL framework (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2018).

***“Reliable rules and practices help to regulate brain pathways”  
(Gerhardt, 2004)***

The last twenty years have seen significant growth in research and good practice on mental health prevention and promotion, and social and emotional learning in schools (Jones, 2018). Today, internationally, teaching and learning in schools have substantial social, emotional, and academic components (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Researchers and practitioners generally agree that schools play a role, not only in young people's cognitive development but also in their social and emotional development (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2003). They have found that all types of learning, whether academic, social, or emotional, are inextricably linked (Zins, 2004), i.e., how we feel influences how we think, and conversely, how we think influences how we feel.

- A.** The brain of a healthy 5-year old child receiving regular social and emotional interaction *versus*
- B.** a 5-year old institutionalised child receiving little or no social or emotional intervention.



**A**

**B**

In a nutshell, SEL refers to skills that can manage the self, relate to others positively and make responsible decisions.

Evidence-based, it focuses on the principle that from birth, our brains are equipped to learn skills and

content related to social behaviours and emotions. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social and Emotional Learning as ‘the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions’ (Yang et al., 2018).

### Five SEL Core Competencies



CASEL further defines SEL as comprising of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioural core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making and relationship skills.

These core competencies are viewed as essential for successful youth development – academically, socially, and emotionally. These core competencies and prosocial skills are all things young people and children with behavioral concerns or substance use disorders may find challenging, and therefore, are in need of support to learn such skills (Education inc., 2018).

### Importance of Teachers Having SEL Knowledge

Results from a study by the Education Endowment

Foundation (2018) suggest school-wide, and executive support for SEL are crucial. Findings showed that when teachers do not feel supported to teach SEL, they are more stressed and less satisfied

with their work.

among all members of the school community;

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

### SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

- ⇒ IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS
- ⇒ ACCURATE SELF-PERCEPTION
- ⇒ RECOGNIZING STRENGTHS
- ⇒ SELF-CONFIDENCE
- ⇒ SELF-EFFICACY

### SOCIAL AWARENESS

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- ⇒ PERSPECTIVE-TAKING
- ⇒ EMPATHY
- ⇒ APPRECIATING DIVERSITY
- ⇒ RESPECT FOR OTHERS

### RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- ⇒ IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS
- ⇒ ANALYZING SITUATIONS
- ⇒ SOLVING PROBLEMS
- ⇒ EVALUATING
- ⇒ REFLECTING
- ⇒ ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

### SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- ⇒ IMPULSE CONTROL
- ⇒ STRESS MANAGEMENT
- ⇒ SELF-DISCIPLINE
- ⇒ SELF-MOTIVATION
- ⇒ GOAL SETTING
- ⇒ ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

### RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- ⇒ COMMUNICATION
- ⇒ SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
- ⇒ RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- ⇒ TEAMWORK

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www.casel.org

Teacher Magazine (2018) note that the researchers recommended that senior leadership foster school-wide support for SEL by:

- Providing teachers with appropriate professional development and ongoing support in SEL;
- Being committed to SEL and promoting effective social and emotional interactions

- Making sure appropriate and sufficient resources are available for teachers to implement SEL effectively in their classrooms.

## Evidence for SEL Interventions

A plethora of evidence exists to support the use of SEL in helping children and young people to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to manage themselves and their relationships with others as well as to make responsible

decisions essential for personal and social wellbeing (Criminology, 2018; Manpower Research Online, 2018). Research has found a significant link between school-based interventions using SEL and improvement in children and young people's social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic gains.

In a review of 207 SEL programmes, there were gains of 11% on test outcomes, 25% on social and emotional skills and a reduction of 10% in classroom behaviour issues (CASEL, 2009). Findings show positive youth outcomes in the areas of mental wellbeing, character development, school success, career success and responsible citizenship (Durlak et al., 2011). Implementing social and emotional learning initiatives into the classroom, and particularly into traditional academic work, is not easy and gaining momentum to influence real change is a challenge. Two large meta-analyses have been carried out on SEL programmes.

A 2011 analysis, which considered 213 studies involving 270,000 participants in evidence-based SEL programmes, showed that compared to others, those who participated in the SEL intervention showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic achievement, improved classroom behaviour, and ability to manage stress and

depression, and better attitudes about school, others, and themselves.

A 2015 study found statistically significant associations between SEL skills and education, employment, criminal activity, substance use and mental health. The study also found that early pro-social skills decreased the likelihood of being in social housing, receiving social welfare, having any involvement with the police, and ever being in prison or an offenders centre.

A 2017 meta-analysis looking at 82 studies involving 100,000+ young people found that compared to those who did not take part in SEL programmes, those who did displayed immediate improvements in mental health, social skills, and academic achievement (Casel, 2018). The research findings showed that these improvements were found to last for years after their participation in the programmes. Participants also showed more positive social behaviours and attitudes, empathy, teamwork, and academic performance. They also displayed better conduct, less emotional distress and lower drug use than their peers who did not take part.

Other research studies have found similar results and report positive outcomes in mental well-being,



character development, school and career success and responsible citizenship.

## SEL Implementation Strategies

Alexander Shanter (2015) from the Education Endowment Foundation suggests there are three broad categories of SEL interventions: a) Universal programmes which generally take place in the classroom b) specialist programmes aimed at students with particular social and emotional issues c) school-level approaches to developing a positive school ethos which also aims to support greater engagement in learning (2018).

One example of a system using an SEL framework is "FutureFit" which takes a 'whole-child' approach, inspiring young people to reach their full potential in the classroom, in college, in their careers, and in the community (YMCA, 2018). The developers of FutureFit writing on the Cool Cat Teacher website (2018), suggest some ideas for introducing SEL into the classroom:

- a) Identify what SEL means at your school
- b) Identify disconnected students in your school
- c) Understand that SEL should be a continuous effort
- d) Integrate SEL into the core curriculum
- e) Teach SEL when using technology

- f) Enable hands-on learning and service projects
- g) Partner with families and communities

Another example of a successful SEL programme is UNIQUE – a Behaviour and Learning Intervention set up to meet the needs of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in a mainstream environment. UNIQUE aims to celebrate differences in the individual child and create a place where they can learn life skills and social awareness to fulfill their potential. Lauren Bond (2018), the developer of UNIQUE, suggests some things to do when introducing SEL. She states the importance of having reliable and predictable routines, activities and rituals which she says help the child adapt to school and reduces his or her levels of anxiety - which in turn minimises the potential risk of a crisis. Bond highlights the importance of predictability and making children and young people feel safe in their environment, providing them with calm spaces and ensuring that their experience at school is as predictable and consistent as possible to limit their anxiety. She suggests doing this using visual timetables and 'Ooops' cards. Bond also states the importance of consistency and accuracy. She highlights staff support, reward, having a

consequence system, saying what you mean and meaning what you say and she draws attention to providing short and concise feedback.

Writing on behalf of Mentor (2018), Bond provides some practical suggestions of what to do to promote SEL in the classroom:

- Use a timer to moderate anxiety during short, timed, independent tasks
- Have clear, structured and differentiated tasks which can be completed with little help from the teacher, with materials all nearby. This reduces the potential threat of “not knowing” something and feeling unsupported. The learning task is the starting point for pupils who find relationships challenging. By differentiating the task, it allows the pupil to gauge the thoughtfulness of the teacher and helps to build trust in the relationship
- Work with peer mentors to learn how to work independently and ask for help when needed. The child will feel more comfortable accessing help from his/her peers
- Give the focus child a small, transitional object that can take your place for short periods of time. What we pay attention to we see more of.

- Comment on the children’s progress when they are working independently and praise them in a concise, matter-of-fact fashion

In a blog (Meeting House, 2018), Annie Snyder, Director of Research and Learning Design at Second Avenue Learning outlines five guiding principles when introducing SEL: Create, Integrate, Communicate, Instruct, and Empower.

**Create:** Consciously create a nurturing, caring, and safe environment for children and young people

**Integrate:** Incorporate skill-building into usual lessons when possible. Keep social and emotional learning at the forefront of the mind, and continuously revisit incorporation tactics to find new, creative ways to integrate SEL.

**Communicate:** Consider the broader community and interact early and often with all SEL stakeholders. Every stakeholder a child or young person meets during the day should be aware of SEL objectives and communicate with colleagues and others about concerns and progress.

**Instruct:** Consider SEL as you would any other topic – as information and lessons worth detailed, planned instruction, with precise guidance ensure children and

young people fully understand the content of SEL and expectations.

**Empower:** Ensure children and young people are empowered to take personal responsibility for their SEL and ensure they are supported to enable them to move to the next phase of their social, emotional and academic lives with confidence.

“We define the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks.” (Elias et al., 1997; Payton et al., 2000)

It is essential to keep trying and trying again to introduce SEL. Taylor et al. (2017) found that young people who received social and emotional instruction and support programmes gained thirteen percentile points in academic performance, social skills, behavioural skills, and attitudes over students who did not receive the intervention. Those children and young people who are competent in SEL can recognise and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions (Elias et al., 1997; Payton et al., 2000).

“Do Something now. If not you, who? If not here, where? If not now, when?” Theodore Roosevelt

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