



EU-SELF
**Social and Emotional Skills Development in Early
Childhood Education and Care in Europe**
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KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices
KA201 - Strategic Partnerships for school education

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Project

“Social and Emotional Skills Development in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe”

Social and Emotional Skills in Early and Preschool Years: Development, Assessment and Intervention Key Topics Overview

IO3

**EU-SELF - Social and Emotional Skills
in Early and Preschool Children**



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Social and Emotional Learning in a holistic perspective

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Holistic image of the child

We are living in an international context of ‘schoolification’ of the early years. Preschools seem to have the task/assignment to prepare children to be ready to enter formal school (Van Laere, Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012). Developmental stages and goals show the way in which children must grow, “let the rat race begin”. A critical point of view on the way we talk about children is needed (Verhaeghe, 2020). Vandenbroeck argues that there is a need for: “Stories that consider social, ecological and holistic perspectives, rather than playing the Olympic games of development, reducing childhood to a profitable investment” (Vandenbroeck, 2020, p. 5). “Every child and adult has the right to develop in an environment of equity and with respect for diversity [...] without distinction or discrimination [...] whether of himself or of his family” (UN declaration of the rights of the child, 1989).

This key topic paper wants to start from a holistic image of child. With attention for the ‘being child’, a child as an ‘Other’ but equal social actor that constructs childhood and influences society (Uprichard, 2008). Especially when talking about social and emotion learning (SEL) this image of child is preconditional. In recent years, there has been an increase in the development and implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in ECEC settings (Mondi, Giovanelli, & Reynolds, 2021). In this respect it is important to see the child in his context, with a story and a voice that has to be taken seriously (Verhaeghe, 2020).

Considering the whole development of a child goes from motor development to the abstract and logical thinking, from understanding of the physical and social world to expression and communication, from self-direction/agency to entrepreneurship and from emotional well-being to connectedness. (Laevers, Declercq & Van Esch, 2019, p. 13)

“What children learn is linked to where, how and with whom they learn. Children feel, move, do things together, explore, play, talk, are creative and think, all at the same time. They learn with their minds, hearts and hands.” (Vandenbroeck et al, 2014, p. 17)

A holistic approach to children’s development, integrates all the different development areas and recognises the interconnectedness of the different domains.



Identity and relationships

Social and emotional development is strongly connected to identity development. Yates et al. (2008, p. 2) define social and emotional development as “the emerging ability to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn — all in the context of family, community, and culture” (Yates et al., 2008, p. 2). The Other plays a crucial role in the process of identity development. (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, 2020). According to CASEL social and emotional learning competences include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Children’s social and emotional development depend very much on responsive relationships with family and caregivers and an encouraging and caring environment (Bierman and Motamedi, 2015; McClelland, et al., 2017; Blewitt, et al., 2018). There is strong evidence that the relationships are foundational for the development and well-being of those involved (Cadima & Grande, 2022). Cadima & Grande (2022, p. 184) emphasize the influence of reciprocal child-adult interactions, underscoring the importance of nurturing relationships. There is a need for professionals that support a strong self-image and who give children the space to write their own story (Vandenbroeck, 2001). To create an all-inclusive pedagogical climate, identity is a central pedagogical concept (Verhaeghe & Wastijn, 2019).

Pedagogical climate

Within every organization that works with children, a pedagogical vision should be the keypoint for shaping many aspects. The pedagogical vision is translated into a pedagogical climate in which space plays an important role (De Wit, 2003).

De Wit (2003) defines the pedagogical climate as follows:

“The way in which the intention of adults to create favourable conditions for the (holistic) development of children, takes shape in the interaction between adults and children and the design of the environment in which they live together”

It’s considered that every organization strives for optimal development opportunities for every child. It’s therefore important that the vision of the organization adapted to the age and development of the children (De Wit, 2003). Well-being and involvement of children are important process variables to become aware of how the organization is succeeding in creating

the best possible conditions for children to develop. In this approach the perspective of the children is central (Laevers et al., 2005). By staying in touch with their own feelings and being connected to others, a high well-being secures a positive self-image and confidence. When the well-being of children is mostly high, we can be almost sure that the social-emotional of children is positive. Involvement of children makes sure that children will keep on exploring the world. It is a condition for deep level learning (Laevers et al., 2019)

Educational professionals

Educational professionals create a warm and welcoming environment for children where they can experience a sense of belonging. Children need to feel at home and feel connected to the community. The possibility for children to feel belonging is conditioned by being present (the being child) and having the ability to be involved in activities (participation) (Piškur et al., 2021)

To support this pedagogical climate, professionals need to be aware of their own narrative (Verhaeghe & Wastijn, 2019). In this context it's important that educational professionals develop insights in both their own and children's narrative identity (Verhaeghe, Den Haese & De Raedemaeker, 2016). To create an inclusive pedagogical climate where children can experience a sense of belonging, a diversattitude is needed. (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, 2020). The diversattitude includes five basic attitudes of the educational professional. These include: socio-cultural awareness, empathy, respect, curiosity and openness. By adopting the diversattitude, educational professionals become aware of their own narrative. Educators with a 'diversattitude' will respect children's narration and show openness to hear children's thoughts and opinions, which is essential when talking about children's right to participation. It supports the professional to use diversity as a strength (Verhaeghe & Wastijn, 2019).

Environment

Within the development of a child, safety, both physical and emotional safety, are an indispensable condition; When considering emotional security, the spatial component cannot be forgotten. Colours, materials and furnishing determine the atmosphere that a space exudes (De Wit, 2003; Van Liempd & Hoekstra, 2012).

It's important that the space corresponds to the vision of the users, in the first place the children. The building must support them. Each space should offer the child the affection to



develop his personal competences (De Wit, 2003). The space should encourage children to play. Through play, children learn to deal with the world around them. They can develop many motor-, creative and social skills through play (Van Liempd & Hoekstra, 2012).

Children should, as it were, be able to push their limits in a safe space, without being dependent on the adult. In this way, their self-esteem grows (Van Liempd & Hoekstra, 2012). The space facilitates children to become aware of themselves in relation to others and the environment. This is an important aspect for the identity development of each child (Van Liempd & Hoekstra, 2011).

Conclusion

With this paper we want to emphasize the importance of the being child. An inclusive pedagogical climate supports the whole development of the child and strengthens childrens' sense of belonging. The Other takes up a pivotal role in this process. Identity development is a key pedagogical concept. Therefore, we need educational professionals with 'a diversattitude', that allow children to write their own personal narrative while feeling connected to the whole community. The environment has to be designed in a way that children experience physical and emotional safety and where they are encouraged to explore the world.

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Social and Emotional Development in Early and Preschool Years

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Children start learning about themselves and others via the system of social interactions with peers and adults. These skills enable them to learn from others. Following their maturation and the enrichment of their individual experience, children develop skills to regulate and control emotions and behaviour, adhering to the mastered rules and norms. Successful social and emotional development during early childhood favours the child's overall development throughout their life. Many researchers (Berk, 2018) of early childhood development accept that socialisation, based on expanding social communication, improvement of social cognition and following social norms in relation to other social subjects, is decisive for all areas of mental development, influencing the development of a child's full potential.

Child development is a dynamic, reciprocal process conditioned by genetic factors, the influence of which is mediated and unfolded as a result of interactions with the social world. The child actively restructures his diverse living environment and interrelationships with it. At the same time, he is affected by the elements of this environment, both from the immediate and the wider environment. Social development is a change in personal understanding, attitudes and behaviour in relation to other subjects over time. These changes occur in the process of socialisation. At the same time, socialisation is not a one-way process. On the contrary, relationships are viewed as bidirectional. As the parent influences the child's development, the child also influences the parent. A child's earliest relationships are seen as the most important in his life. They lay the foundation for the construction of a model of social behaviour and communication that would regulate his future relationships. As an infant grows, his relationships with his parents, siblings, peers, or other children become integral to his social development. However, these relationships do not exist in a vacuum. They are impacted by the social and cultural context in which the child grows and develops. Cultural, ethnic and religious differences influence the way people interact with each other and therefore affect various aspects of children's social development. They are mediated by the individual characteristics and personality traits of the child, his temperament and attitudes. Moreover, individual parenting methods also play a role. Thus, a child's unique interaction pattern is formed,

significantly affecting his future mental development.

Although emotions and social behaviour are inherent in every human being, this area of development faces several challenges:

- Large individual differences;
- An extensive set of behaviours;
- Significant variability based on different cultural and situational contexts.

Social and emotional development is a complex area. In general, however, it encompasses two main components: (1) knowledge and behaviour toward the self and (2) knowledge and behaviour toward others. Despite this complexity of early social and emotional development, some key markers are defined, which children between 0 and 6-7 years must reach, in order for their development to be considered age-appropriate, taking into account, of course, individual differences (Atanasova-Trifonova et al. 2014a; Atanasova-Trifonova et al. 2014b):

- Developing attachment to the primary caregiver, usually the mother - the child smiles (3 months), coos (3 months), makes eye contact (3 months), recognizes faces and voices (4-6 months), seeks closeness with the adult (4-6 months), shows a preference for the adult (7-9 months), actively seeks contact with the adult (10-12 months), uses the parent as a "safe base" for exploring the environment, develops relationships based on affection and trust with other family members and adults outside the family (13-24 months), seeks help and support from the adult, shows gestures of affection (13-24 months), expresses affection for the adult using words and actions (25-36 months)
- Initiating social interactions, social interaction - child smiles (4-6 months), laughs (4-6 months), listens to own name (4-6 months), responds to social stimuli, facial expressions of emotion (5 months), plays simple games with the adult (9 months), plays alone (11 months), plays simple games (13-24 months), "parallel play", pretend play, uses objects in symbolic ways during play (25-36 months)
- Self-recognition - studies own body, sucks fingers, examines hands (0-3 months), looks in a mirror (4-6 months); recognises himself in pictures, recognises his voice on a recording (10-12 months); knows his name, knows his physical features and other characteristics (13-18 months), knows his gender



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(19-24 months), knows personal information (31-36 months), describes himself (31-36 months)

- Develops emotional and trusting relationships with other family members and adults outside the family (13-24 months)
- Develops relationships with peers and other children - begins to develop relationships with other children (13-24 months), engages in games, exchanges toys with other children (25-30 months), develops rudimentary relationships with other children, "parallel play" (25-36 months). Likes to spend more time with peers (5-6 years). Shows a deeper understanding of relationships with others (ages 7-8).
- Awareness of self and ability to do things - compares self and own skills to those of others (19-24 months), has a general idea of whether he can perform a specific action correctly (19-24 months), a strong sense of self — describes own behaviour (25-30 months), begins to evaluate self and others (31-36 months)
- Fear of strangers, separation anxiety (10-12 months)
- Imitating (10-12 months), modelling after (13-24 months), beginning to imitate social roles (25-36 months)
- Observes rules and norms - begins to conform to instructions and prohibitions (13-18 months), waits his turn (19-24 months), encourages keeping the order (25-30 months), evaluates violations of the norm (25-30 months), complies with social norms (31-36 months), etiquette training represents a significant internalisation of social rules and expectations (25-36 months). Can follow simple rules and directions (5-6 years). Fully understands rules and regulations (ages 7-8).
- Beginning of a desire for independence (13-18 months), which intensifies (18-30 months). "No" is a powerful word (19-24 months), asserts independence (25-30 months).
- Takes care of toys and other personal items, shows a sense of private ownership (31-36 months).
- Impulse control (30-54 months).
- Play - By age 3, engages more in interactive play, controls aggression, and learns collaborative and sharing skills. Can play with 1-2 peers, wait their turn and have

a common goal. Imaginary play develops but still cannot distinguish between reality and imagination. The latter happens around the age of 4. Imaginative play becomes more involved (5-6 years).

- Can take responsibility for simple chores (ages 7-8).
- Moral development develops, and he learns more complex coping skills (ages 7-8).

Several factors influence the socialisation of children in the family, such as the personal qualities and beliefs of the parents, the child's personality and behaviour, the social context, the models and styles of parental conduct and upbringing, the family structure, etc. (Kolcheva, 2001). The family can be seen as a system consisting of mutually influencing and interdependent subsystems, and child development cannot be regarded outside of this context. Relationships with peers, the structure of the peer group, friendships, the context of the daycare facility, if the child attends one, etc., also influence children's development and socialisation.

Complex and rich, full of explorations and obstacles, human life is a product that is the sum of the actions of many factors, both biological and social in origin. Social development in the early and preschool years is key to helping transition a young child into an independent, well-functioning adult later in life.

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Assessment of Social and Emotional Skills in Early and Preschool Years

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In recent years a large body of research has been conducted focusing on social and emotional learning (SEL), which is defined as a process in which children, young people and adults adopt certain behaviours, thoughts, and attitudes to develop their identity in a healthy way, set goals, manage their emotions, and develop/maintain quality relationships with others (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). This research provided evidence that SEL promotes and empowers people with skills to deal with different life situations, whether positive or negative (Greenberg et al., 2017). Especially in the case of children and adolescents, research shows that the inclusion of SEL in academic curricula promotes not only the academic success of students, but also the adoption of prosocial behaviours (e.g., Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016). In addition, the acquisition of social and emotional skills seems to be related to the reduction of disruptive behaviours and the improvement of the classroom social climate (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019).

This evidence supporting the importance usefulness of SEL for mental health and wellbeing, especially for children and adolescents, fuelled a trend, which conducted to a substantial increase on the development and implementation of SEL promotion programs in school/educational contexts (Greenberg et al., 2017). Consequently, a great quantity and diversity of methods, materials, contents, and activities was generated, as well as the way by which these programs could be assessed for efficiency and validity purposes, which means SEL assessment instruments. Nevertheless, and despite the accelerated growth of SEL field, the continuous emergence of new intervention programs and instruments that assess their effectiveness or the acquisition of SEL skills (Denham et al., 2010), many of these instruments are not validated for the European population. Therefore, it's important and urgent to identify and characterize the existing instruments, not only for them to be known and used by professionals and educational agents in general, but also to allow practitioners to understand the effectiveness and impact of their intervention on children and adolescents.



In this sense, EU-SELF project (Development of social and emotional skills in early childhood education and care in Europe, ERASMUS+:2019-1-BG01-KA201-062593), aimed to provide a list of measures, used across Europe, to assess core socioemotional skills defined by CASEL, with special focus on children aged 0 to 7 years. The result was a comprehensive compendium containing a comprehensive list of SEL assessment measures for the referred age group, already being used throughout Europe, as a part of the implementation of SEL programs and activities. The list results from an extensive research effort, to identify valid, evidence-based, measures that can be used by professionals in their practice. Research, selection, and compilation of SEL assessment measures followed a specific set of inclusion criteria:

- Assessment measures for typically developing children.
- Assessment measures for children between 0 and 7 years of age.
- Assessment measures that cover at least one or more CASEL domains, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.
- Assessment measures that cover cognitive skills (e.g., attention, executive functioning, memory processing), that despite not being considered SEL skills nevertheless are associated with the referred CASEL domains.
- Assessment measures developed and/or adapted and standardized for any of the European countries.

The assessment measures compiled included measures with different rating types, or in other words from different informants, namely child, parents, teachers, peer, and direct assessment. This means that there's a wide variety of measures that professionals can use accordingly with the characteristics, needs and level of engagement of children, as well as with the contextual conditions of the intervention, and the methodological design. This gives professionals a lot of flexibility in terms of the choosing the best measures to fit their intervention and method.

On the same context, we were also able to identify different types of SEL assessment measures accordingly with the assessment method, namely:

- Questionnaires.
- observational measures.
- performance-based measures.
- Interviews.



Again, the variety of types of assessment measures, concerning format, allows professionals to opt for the measures that best fit the characteristics of the subjects that will perform assessment. For example, when working with very young children, or even parents with lower levels of literacy, it might prove useful to have alternative measures to questionnaires.

Most measures were developed in the USA and then applied and adapted to other countries, especially in the European context. Concerning SEL assessment measures developed in European countries, we registered instruments from the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, Italy, and the Netherlands. The majority of SEL assessment measures are directed to children with ages between 3 and 7 years old, which means that there's a need to develop more measures to use with younger children. The majority of measures uses parents and teachers as informants and use questionnaires and direct assessment as preferred format. Very few measures use other types of formats, namely observational, performance-bases or interviews.

Responsible decision-making is the least assessed CASEL dimension of SEL, with the other four dimensions equally represented in the assessment measures, and by a big margin. Which suggests that it's urgent to develop SEL assessment measures that include the dimension of responsible decision-making, as it is no less important in this field of intervention.

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Programs for social and emotional skills development in early and preschool years

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Defining the topic

While there is wide agreement concerning the importance of social and emotional skills, deciding on how to promote these skills is another matter. Practice and research in this field is commonly encompassed under the term social and emotional learning (SEL). Although this gives some sense of direction, there are some inherent issues in this field that need to be sorted out beforehand. In this case, the outstanding issue pertains to ambiguity in how SEL is defined (Djamnezhad et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2016). In order to know *how* we should develop certain skills – we need to know *what* skills we aim to develop. SEL is a broad term, with many different frameworks suggesting different definitions and terminology. An example of a popular framework is the one outlined by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning; CASEL, n.d.-a). While there is a considerable overlap among frameworks, there are certainly instances where one thing may be labeled as SEL by one definition and not another. As this is a brief overview, intended to provide a snapshot of the field, there won't be a strict adherence to any specific framework.

What is a SEL-program?

As SEL might be considered an ambiguous term, this may also reflect on how programs in the field are defined. That is not to say that there are no ways to specify what we mean by SEL-programs. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be on illustrating the field using examples of programs that have an explicit intent to develop skills that are typically encompassed in SEL frameworks, such as social interaction and emotional regulation. It is also important to note that the focus here is on universal programs, also known as primary prevention, i.e., programs designed for use with all children, rather than specific disabilities or other subgroups. A more specified definition is offered by Jones et al. (2021) who writes the following:



Social and emotional learning programs are defined as those that are designed to build children's social and emotional skills and competencies by: (a) explicitly teaching specific skills through direct instruction, including introducing and modeling SEL skills and supporting students to use and apply them across diverse settings; (b) improving classroom and school climate, often by targeting teacher practices and school norms and expectations; and/or (c) influencing student mindsets such as their perceptions of themselves, others, and school. (p. 5)

Note that this begins to approach the subject of what comprises an *effective* SEL-program. Similarly, the SAFE acronym, which entails the following (Durlak et al., 2010; 2011):

Sequenced	Does the program use a connected and coordinated set of activities to achieve their objectives relative to skill development?
Active	Does the program use active forms of learning to help youth learn new skills?
Focused	Does the program have at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills?
Explicit	Does the program target specific SEL skills rather than targeting skills or positive development in general terms?

The authors found that SAFE moderated student outcomes, i.e., SEL-programs (both in-school and after-school) classified as SAFE had better outcomes for students. In this context the acronym was primarily used to classify SEL-programs who theoretically had clear mechanisms in place to drive social and emotional development. To be clear, it was not used to classify what constituted a program or not. Another important factor derived from this research is the role of implementation. That is, using the program as intended in order to get the desirable outcomes (Durlak, 2016).

Note that so far, no specific practices have been covered regarding what these SEL-programs actually contain. While SEL-programs might find common ground in their goals to develop social and emotional skills, they can vary considerably in content and method of delivery. Similar to how SEL can vary as a concept. In addition to the developers frame of reference for how SEL is defined, program content can also vary depending on the intended context and developmental level. Since children develop at a considerable rate, it should be no

surprise if programs make large changes based on age even within a specific context. In this paper, the examples will focus on the early years and preschool as a context. This means that programs are likely to be adapted to develop foundational social and emotional skills, such as recognizing emotions, taking turns etc. While both settings feature group-based activities, the form should also reflect the developmental level, such as play-based activities rather than didactic instruction for preschool children (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). An overview of the practices suggests a mixture of activities. Compared to elementary school the preschool SEL-programs incorporate more use of stories, music, puppet demonstrations and movement activities (Jones et al. 2021). A considerable share of preschool programs are more extensively focused on teacher training and integrating SEL in to everyday practice, rather than providing materials and specific activities. While many programs may incorporate both aspects, they are usually concentrated on one or the other. One way to label these differences in SEL-programming is by distinguishing between lesson-based curricula or noncurricular approaches (Jones et al. 2017).

Lesson-based curricula

As previously mentioned, these programs typically contain pre-packaged content, usually in the form of developmentally appropriate and sequentially arranged lesson plans, along with related materials. After some training and perhaps ongoing support, the teacher should be equipped to deliver the content and activities to the whole group of preschool children. Professional development may often be included or required but the primary focus of these programs is in implementing a previously specified curriculum.

While this mode of programming is more popular in elementary school, with didactic instruction and group discussions being more feasible options for lesson planning, these programs are still available for preschools. Mostly due to programs being adapted from school to preschool settings. Also as mentioned, the lessons will then be more developmentally appropriate, utilizing activities such as stories and puppet demonstrations more extensively.

An example of such a program is Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS). PATHS is available for elementary school but has a package for preschool/kindergarten containing 44 lesson plans along with related materials, such as puppets, storybooks, and posters (PATHS Program, n.d.). The program has integrated social and emotional learning into five conceptual domains: self-control, emotional understanding, positive self-esteem,

relationships, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. The lesson plans may then involve specific skill building adapted to preschool children, such as practicing self-control through a strategy called the “turtle technique”. As mentioned before, skill building primarily resides in the lesson-based activities, but teachers are also encouraged to reinforce the concepts in everyday practice (Greenberg & Kusché, 2006).

PATHS for preschool has been evaluated in several studies, while generally promising results, the study design and outcomes vary. Most of the studies have been conducted in the United States (e.g., Calhoun et al., 2020 or Bierman et al., 2021 as a Head Start REDI follow-up). The preschool version has also been studied in the UK (Berry et al., 2016), Croatia (Mihic et al., 2016), Turkey (Bilir Seyhan et al., 2019), Pakistan (Inam, Tariq & Zaman, 2015), and Sweden (Eninger et al., 2021).

There are several other pre-packaged and pre-planned SEL-programs designed for kindergarten with promising results. Here, PATHS is used an example of a typical SEL-program implemented in a more curricular fashion, rather than an endorsement of a specific program.

Noncurricular approaches

Some programs designed to develop social and emotional skills for preschool children rely extensively on professional development for teachers, without necessarily providing lessons and materials. An example of this is the Inredible Years-series, primarily the Teacher Classroom Management Program (IY-TCM) and Incredible Beginnings Program. The primary difference between the programs lies in the age range, where IY-TCM is more appropriate for teachers working with ages 3-8, with Incredible Beginnings being more directed at teachers working with ages 1-5. As such the Incredible Beginnings may in theory be more appropriate for practitioners working exclusively with preschool children, or if working with toddlers specifically. Both programs consist of 6 full day workshops, with space between them. Both versions cover similar topics during the workshops, such as positive behavior management, social skills, and emotional regulation. Though the contents are weighted towards their respective age ranges. For example, the Incredible Beginnings Program covers more content regarding separation anxiety and early language development. Generally, topics that are more relevant in caring for toddlers (The Incredible Years, n.d.). Note that these programs are



different from the classroom dinosaur curriculum offered by the Incredible Years, which consists of pre-planned lessons.

While research on Incredible Beginnings has been sparse, there has been enough research on IY-TCM to warrant a systematic review and meta-analysis. While there were no significant effects on prosocial behaviors, high-risk children had less conduct problems and teachers decreased their use of negative classroom management strategies (Nye et al., 2018). However, as age or setting was not analyzed separately these results are not exclusive to preschool settings.

Earlier, Jones & Bouffard (2012) have made the case that integrated approaches have the potential to rise above the limitations of lesson-based, curricular approaches. They list several reasons, such as the potential of being more integrated with academic curricula and daily practice. Note that they do not advocate replacing curricular approaches entirely, rather that the approaches could complement each other. Although research is sparse concerning a combined and integrated approach, there are some studies suggesting promising results (e.g., Cook et al., 2015; Domitrovich et al., 2010; Reinke, Herman & Ialongo, 2012).

Additional resources

The previous sections should give an idea of how SEL-programming can take a wide variety of shapes. Nonetheless, a wider array of options may not always facilitate decisions on what practices to adopt. Research is always an important aspect to consider. Two meta-analyses saw generally positive results from SEL-interventions in preschools (Blewitt et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2020). However, a more tentative interpretation has been recommended due to heterogeneity in the studies and interventions used (Djamnezhad et al., 2021).

Another option is to review programs separately. Several resources compiling information on several aspects, including research, regarding programs are made available to practitioners and policymakers. CASEL (n.d.-b) provides a database of researched SEL-programs designed for most organized learning environments. Jones et al. (2021) also provides summaries of SEL-programs, codifying several important aspects of SEL-programming. A compendium of SEL-programs available in Europe has also been compiled by the EU-SELF project (Koltcheva et al., 2022). There are also compilations not specifically focused on SEL, but universal prevention programs in general, such as Blueprints



(www.blueprintsprograms.org) and the Xchange prevention registry (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction [EMCDDA], n.d.), which focuses more on Europe.

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, SEL is a broad term. The programs designed for universal prevention in preschool and other organized learning environments reflect this diversity. Preschools looking to advance their practices in developing social and emotional skills have some resources to review, though evidence-based SEL-programs are not necessarily available and ready to implement everywhere.

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Programs for social and emotional skills development in disadvantage children

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Feelings, different emotions are daily companions, in every situation, throughout life. Emotions can be experienced in connection with certain persons, groups, situations or experienced through self-referential perception, have self-esteem enhancing or self-esteem weakening effects. Dealing with one's own emotions and those of other people determines behaviour in a wide variety of life situations and also social relationships with other people. Therefore, the handling of one's own should be accompanied, supported and encouraged in social interaction in order to improve social interaction and positively promote the development of social-emotional competence.

Emotional competence is understood as the ability to "deal appropriately with one's own emotions and with the emotions of others" (Scheithauer, Bondü & Mayer, 2008, p. 145). According to Petermann and Wiedebusch (2008), it presupposes a number of concrete emotional skills such as the mimic and/or linguistic expression of emotions; the recognition and understanding of feelings in oneself and in others; empathy and self-directed emotion regulation.

Social competence means being able to act effectively in a social interaction with children and adults. This includes achieving one's own goals while maintaining positive relationships over time and across different situations (Petermann, 2002; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In addition, social competence includes the ability to establish positive relationships with peers (which requires the ability to take on social perspectives), self-management skills (mood regulation or conflict resolution), school-related competencies (e.g. asking questions, following teacher's instructions), cooperative skills (e.g. following social rules, dealing with criticism appropriately) and positive self-assertion and assertiveness (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997). Emotional and social competence are closely related to each other – some emotional skills are the prerequisite for socially competent behaviour.



Studies show (Bierman et. al, 2016; Blair and Raver, 2015; Clarkson Freeman, 2014) that children with high emotional competence and thus more empathy also have a high social competence and thus better pro-social behaviour which makes them more popular in the peer group (and less aggressive).

Children with little emotional competence however, appear to lack social competence and show externalized conduct disorders more frequently. Studies (Clarkson Freeman, 2014; Blair and Raver, 2015; 2016) have found that children with social and emotional problems tend to have weaknesses in the field of emotional competence. Frightened children tend to have a limited repertoire of possible mimic expressions and are more unsure when interpreting the emotions of others. Children with aggressive behaviour stand out more frequently for their restricted emotional competence. Children who have problems regulating their emotions and handling their emotions constructively are more likely to be rejected by peers and seen as less socially competent (Clarkson Freeman, 2014).

When a child doesn't understand the emotions of another it can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Appropriate anger regulation strategies on the other hand can work against the appearance of behavioural disorders. Children with social-emotional competencies have shown to integrate easier into a group of peers and adapt better to new challenges (e.g. in school) (Domitrovich, et al. 2017). Children with a high level of social-emotional competence come to attention less frequently on account of behavioural problems. On the other hand poorly developed social-emotional competences are a significant risk factor for a variety of problems (such as aggressive-dissocial behaviour) (Clarkson Freeman, 2014).

The development of emotional skills involving the expression, understanding and regulation of feelings can and should be deliberately supported and encouraged in children.

A distinction must be made between:

- *primary prevention methods* for children without developmental disabilities,
- *secondary prevention methods* for children with an increased risk of disorders in emotional development and
- *psychotherapeutic procedures for children who already show difficulties* in their development and specific emotional skills deficits (Heinrichs, Döpfner & Petermann, 2013).



In the *primary prevention of behavioural disorders and developmental disorders*, it makes sense to implement emotional and social competence programs and activities as early as possible with the following aims:

- to prevent social and emotional disorders and behavioural disorders - as children having poor developed social and emotional skills tend to develop behavioural difficulties.
- to identify the children at risk of developing behavioural difficulties (children with a challenging temperament (Petermann & Kullik, 2011), insecure attachment relationships and family stressors (Schmidt, DeMulder & Denham, 2002), and early support and intervention needs of the child (Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2007)).
- to support the development of pro-social behaviour as various emotional skills form the basis for empathy and prosocial behaviour (the ability of emotional perspective taking) (Eisenberg et al., 1997; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998) implicitly influencing the development of the social behaviour.
- to promote school readiness and success in the school. Children who have developed age-appropriate emotional competencies are more likely to succeed in school than children who show deficits in emotional skills (Raver, 2006; Denham, 2006; Garner, 2010).

Support activities and programs in the pre-school through which emotional competence is strengthened, promote the development of better coping strategies for the social and cognitive demands of the transition to the school (Blair, 2002). From birth, babies and young children are heavily reliant on their adult caregivers, and the attachments they form in these early years may be critical indicators for later childhood and adulthood development. Children with secure attachments will receive reliable support from their parents in dealing with their own feelings in emotionally challenging situations. Unfortunately, not all children do receive equal opportunities for successful attachments. Parents are also important model persons for the expression and handling of feelings the children can use as a guide as they increasingly try out their own regulation strategies. Besides the parents, the wider family environment of children, and reference persons in institutionalized educational institutions, i.e. teachers as (early) childhood educators, are important model persons therefore also playing a central role in the emotional development of young children (Ahn, 2005b).



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Educational programs and curriculum for social and emotional skills development

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Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which emphasizes the learning and teachability of SEL alongside academic learning, is a paradigm shift, now a worldwide movement in education.

As a result of recent research, it can be argued that SEL (*social and emotional learning*) plays a significant role in promoting students' complex development and academic achievement. Current research and scholars on the topic have also agreed that SEL competencies are teachable, promote positive development, reduce problem behaviors, and prove student academic outcomes. As in the case of academic competencies, the teaching of SEL needs to be implemented through explicit instruction, defined in the learning environment and curriculum.

According to Williford et al. (2015), teaching SEL, i.e. incorporating it into the educational programs "involves training teachers to teach explicit lessons that teach social and emotional skills and then providing opportunities for students to reinforce their use of these skills throughout the day" (2015, p. 8). However, it's important to notice, the development of social and emotional competencies takes place not only in formal and non-formal classrooms and school settings but also at the family, community, and policy levels (Zins et al., 2015). Teachers should be the drivers of SEL programs.

Extra-curricular activities, in non-formal education, also provide opportunities for students to connect with supportive adults and peers (Gullotta, 2015). They are a great place for young people to develop and apply new skills and personal talents. Research has shown that after-school programs that focus on social and emotional development can contribute to developing essential SEL competencies such as self-image, school attachment, positive social behavior, and academic grades while reducing problem behavior (Durlak et al., 2010).

There are two ways of presenting SEL in the curriculum, the most common being to approach the implementation of SEL through teacher training, i.e. teachers teach explicit



lessons in which social and emotional skills are taught and then find opportunities for students to reinforce the use of these skills throughout the day.

The second way is another approach, where SEL content is embedded in academic disciplines taught implicitly, such as English language arts, social studies, or mathematics (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Yoder, 2013; Zins et al., 2004).

The embedding of SEL in school education is a scientifically well-researched area, in contrast to the early childhood period. It is for this reason that, as the EU SELF project has accumulated evidence on the importance of embedding SEL in childcare and early childhood education curricula and daily practice, and as a result of the EU Self research we collected SEL assessment and intervention practices in childcare and early childhood education in 51 countries.

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