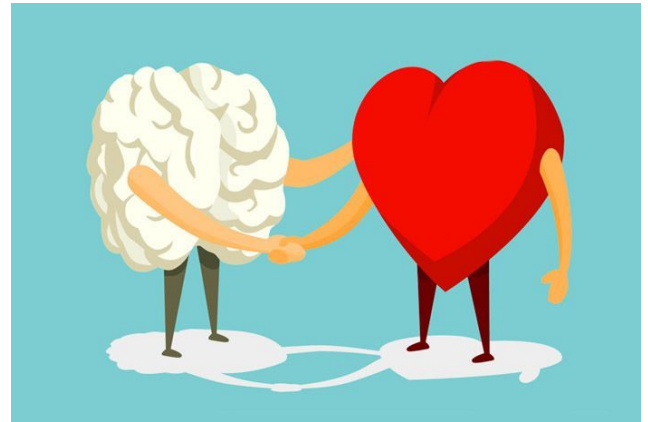


If it were possible to dramatically decrease rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression or impact the prevalence of heart disease, cancer, lung and liver disease, or obesity, would Americans do it? This isn't a quick fix created by adopting the Keto diet, drinking more water from a HydroFlask or riding a Peloton. This incredible feat could be achieved by minimizing childhood trauma and its effects by teaching children and teens about improving their social and emotional health.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) focuses on “teaching kids how to achieve goals, understand and manage emotions, build empathy, forge relationships, and make responsible decisions (Clayton 1). This occurs when families, schools, and communities address “non-academic skills” that enable students to understand and control their “thinking, feelings, and actions” in order to succeed in high school and in the future (Walsh 1).

Acknowledgment of the need for and benefits of SEL is the first step a school can take toward developing students' competencies in these areas.



The impact of social emotional learning became prominent twenty years ago when *The American Journal of Preventive Medicine* published the results of a study that found a correlation between the number of traumas a child experiences by the time he or she is eighteen and his or her future mental and physical health. This negative effects of trauma include those listed above, conditions such as alcoholism, depression, and drug abuse, as well as cancer, heart, liver and lung disease, and obesity (Felitti 249-250).

The research, which is called the [ACES Study](#), utilized a ten question survey to record the level of “adverse childhood experiences” (ACES) experienced by the study participants before they turned eighteen. The [questionnaire](#) identified the existence of childhood trauma in three key areas: psychological abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse (Felitti 248). Questions regarding family dysfunction were also included (248).

Although many may believe that only a small percentage of Americans experience traumatic events of this kind, “more than half of [the 17,000] respondents reported at least one [adverse childhood experience], and one-fourth reported more than two categories of childhood exposure” (245). In total, more than seventy-five percent of experienced had one or more ACES as children or young adults (245). Researchers concluded that negative health effects are proportional to the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) one undergoes (255). One important note, most people surveyed were not urban minorities; the majority of the people who completed the ACES survey were middle or upper middle class whites from San Diego with private health insurance (“Got Your ACES Score? 1).

The researchers found that the causes of this correlation are negative coping mechanisms, such as excessive substance use, overeating, high risk sexual behaviors, and smoking. One way that schools can contribute to the well-being of students with high ACES scores involves the development of healthy coping skills (255).

Number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE Score)	Women	Men	Total
0	34.5	38.0	36.1
1	24.5	27.9	26.0
2	15.5	16.4	15.9
3	10.3	8.6	9.5
4 or more	15.2	9.2	12.5

From “Got Your ACES Score?” *ACES Too High News*, WordPress, 2019, <https://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/>.

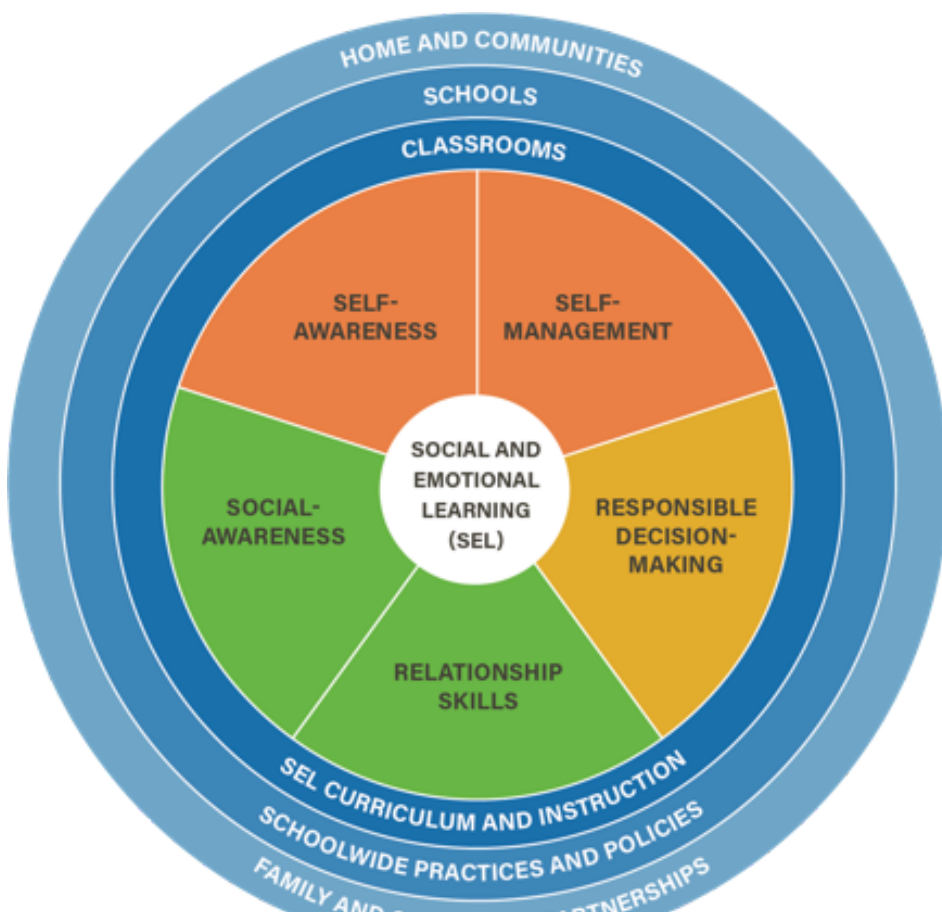
The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit founded in 1994, coined the term “social emotional learning.” CASEL focuses on research, collaboration with schools, and identifying standards and benchmarks in SEL. The social and emotional learning graphic below captures the five areas of SEL skills identified by CASEL that can be developed through social emotional education.

**Self-awareness** includes the ability to evaluate his or her areas of strength and areas of growth. Questions such as “what is your greatest strength in this class and how do you know this?” enable students to think metacognitively about themselves and their abilities.

**Self-management** entails the ability to control his or her emotions and actions in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. Students can ask themselves, “What can I do to be successful when I am confused or stressed out?”

**Social awareness** can be defined as the ability to work and live collaboratively with others - particularly in diverse groups. A socially aware student may ask, “What do I need to do to be empathetic about someone’s pain or frustration?”

**Relationship skills** are the ability to own one’s voice, meaningfully listen, solve problems collegially, resist peer pressure, and give and receive help. Students can ask themselves, “What



can I do to make sure that I understand someone else's point?"

Finally, **responsible decision making** includes the ability to make sound decisions that are based on values, beliefs, and standards. A responsible decision maker could ask, "What should I do when I'm making an unpopular decision in a group?"

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### **Social Emotional Learning Competencies**

**"Self-awareness: Know your strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a 'growth mindset.'**

**Self-management: Effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate yourself to set and achieve goals.**

**Social awareness: Understand the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.**

**Relationship skills: Communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.**

**Responsible decision-making: Make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms" ("Core SEL Competencies" 1).**



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Social emotional learning can mitigate the biological impact of ACES; however, it can also impact students academically and schools behaviorally. CASEL cites research that demonstrates academic gains connected to SEL: a 2011 meta-analysis concluded that students who receive formal SEL instruction experience a double digit gain in academic achievement ("Core SEL Competencies" 1). Data also illustrates an 11% gain on standardized tests and grade-point averages (GPAs) of students who receive SEL training (Hudson 1). This kind of instruction also results in "decreased dropout rates, school and classroom behavior issues, drug use, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, and criminal behavior" ("Core SEL Competencies" 1). Growth in one or more of the five SEL core competencies benefits individuals and society.

It is a 21st century reality that schools and communities must address not only academic instruction but also the education of the whole child. This is a worthy endeavor because it nurtures children and teens today and positively impacts their future and the future resources of the community. Diet and exercise impact one's health in the short and long run, yet social emotional learning may have an even greater impact.

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