



Social and Emotional Competence

Why It's Vital for Life Success

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Executive Summary

Social and emotional competence describes the processes by which children and adults apply knowledge, attitudes and skills in order 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 (CASEL, n.d.). **Research shows that social and emotional competence is a better predictor of future success than IQ** (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015).

Cognitive, emotional and social capabilities do not exist in isolation, but rather develop together throughout the life course. Language acquisition, for example, is built upon a foundation of multiple other skills: hearing, the ability to differentiate sounds, and the ability to pay attention and engage in social interaction. Just as individual strands intertwine to make a rope, cognitive, emotional and social capabilities reinforce and work together to create stronger academic and health outcomes. **Science therefore directs us away from debating which kinds of skills children need most, and toward the realization that they are all intertwined.**

Childhood and adolescence offer the widest window of opportunity to teach social and emotional competence. Brains are built over time, starting in the earliest years of life. Simple skills come first; more complex skills build on top of them. Brain architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health and behavior that follow. Because children spend a significant portion of their time in school during sensitive periods of brain development, it is vital that teachers help develop students' social competence and emotional well-being as well as their academic skills.

Just as students learn reading, math and science through instruction and regular practice in school, social and emotional skills should be explicitly taught and regularly reinforced (Committee for Children, 2016). Teachers and other child-serving professionals have the expertise to deliver effective instruction and collaborate with parents, families and communities to ensure that social, emotional and cognitive skills are mastered.

For these reasons, schools and child-serving programs have a leading role to play in helping children develop the social and emotional competencies that are necessary for lifelong success.

Social and Emotional Competence

The Skills

Academic and technical skills are vital for workforce success, but a growing body of research shows that social and emotional skills – often called “soft skills” – are equally important because they enable people to navigate their environment, work effectively with others, and work toward ambitious goals (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014).

- ✓ **Self-Management:** impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, organizational skills
- ✓ **Responsible Decision Making:** identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, ethical responsibility
- ✓ **Self-Awareness:** Identifying emotions, accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy
- ✓ **Social Awareness:** perspective-taking, empathy, respect for others
- ✓ **Relationship Skills:** communication skills, social engagement, relationship-building, teamwork

These are key “soft skills” frequently sought by employers (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015)

Sources of Social and Emotional Competence

Children learn social and emotional skills from a variety of sources: their parents, peers, siblings, coaches, teachers and other adults in their lives. Coordinated strategies to build and nurture social and emotional learning are necessary across communities, schools, classrooms and home environments, but teachers have a special role to play. Given the amount of time that children spend in school and the fact that teachers are already skilled at academic instruction, the classroom is a powerful place for social and emotional development that both complements and is reinforced by academic learning.

Social and emotional learning does not take place in a single place or through a single program. It involves coordinated efforts across contexts, including schools, homes and communities (CASEL, n.d.).

When social and emotional competence is taught in schools, it ensures all children get the opportunity to learn the important skills necessary for future success. A recent research study showed when social and emotional skills were explicitly taught by teachers in the school, students’ behavior and attitude toward school improved (Durlak et al., 2011).

Implications: The Benefits of Social and Emotional Competence

The benefits of social and emotional competence are far-reaching and affect not only individual children and families, but also our communities. Coordinated efforts to foster social and emotional learning are required from educators, families, policy makers, and community leaders and will yield a better future for all Tennesseans.

Strong social and emotional skills benefit multiple aspects of life: school, the economy, health, and resilience



Supporting Academic Success: Social, emotional and cognitive learning are intertwined much like the strands in a rope and weakening any one of these strands weakens all three. Because of this, early development of social and emotional skills is a predictor of academic readiness and future educational success (Lindqvist & Vestman, 2011; Denham et al., 2013). In addition to helping children’s cognitive abilities, social and emotional competence increases positive attitudes toward school and increases positive student behavior (Kendziora & Osher, 2016).



Enhancing Tennessee’s Economy: A common misconception is that developing and implementing social and emotional learning curriculum will be costly or not have any value later in life. Research shows, however, that the benefits far outweigh the costs. Social and emotional skills are associated with a higher educational attainment, college and career readiness, and higher earnings (Belfield et al., 2015; Lindqvist & Vestman, 2011). Tennessee’s future economic prosperity depends on the social and emotional competence of its children today.



Creating Health: A weak foundation in social and emotional skills has been linked to substance abuse and other poor behavioral health outcomes later in life (Linqvist & Vestman, 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003). Conversely, because strong social and emotional skills are linked to responsible decision making, socially and emotionally competent youth are less likely to partake in risky behaviors.



Fostering Resilience: Social and emotional competence serves as a protective factor. This means children who are at risk for unsafe behavior or outcomes can better navigate difficult situations and avoid negative trajectories by employing appropriate social and emotional skills (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

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