

Improving social and emotional learning in primary schools



This Guidance Report is based on original content from a report of the same name produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF). The original content has been modified where appropriate for the Australian context.

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Foreword

The events of 2020 including the COVID-19 pandemic and bushfires have highlighted the importance of developing social and emotional skills in students, alongside the teaching of literacy, numeracy, and other core content. These 'social and emotional capabilities' are essential for student's development, are important to support effective learning, and are linked to positive outcomes in students' futures.

When carefully implemented, social and emotional learning (SEL) can increase positive student behaviour, mental health and wellbeing, and academic performance. It is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and other vulnerable groups, who on average have weaker social and emotional skills than their peers.

That is why we have developed this Guidance Report. At a time when schools are reviewing their core vision and curriculum, this guidance offers six practical and evidence-based recommendations to support primary aged student's social and emotional development. The Guidance Report provides a starting point for schools to review their current approaches and suggests practical ideas they can implement. Importantly, it argues that such approaches can be embedded into everyday class teaching without creating burdensome new programs of work.

To arrive at the recommendations, our UK partner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), reviewed the best available international research and consulted with teachers and other experts. A group of core skills and strategies that occur frequently in SEL programs that have good evidence of impact were identified, and the recommendations provide guidance on embedding these in the classroom and beyond.

We acknowledge that for many Australian schools, it can be difficult to separate SEL approaches from the many other ways to build wellbeing, resilience and culture. This report offers guidance on SEL as one interlinked aspect of a wider understanding of wellbeing. Any approach to SEL should be considered alongside the curriculum aspects that have been designed to support SEL such as the Health and Physical Education curriculum, and personal and social capabilities.

The international evidence in this area is extensive but knowledge of how best to implement it in Australian schools is still emerging. With this in mind, an over-arching recommendation focuses on the importance of implementing and monitoring progress carefully, and the requirement for school leaders to prioritise this work if it is to have an impact.

We hope this report brings some clarity and direction to an area of teaching and learning that holds much importance.

The Evidence for Learning Team

Introduction

What does this guide cover?

This Guidance Report aims to help primary schools support student's social and emotional development. It draws on a recent [review of the evidence](#) about social and emotional learning conducted by the University of Manchester, which was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF). It also draws on a wider body of global evidence and expert input, including a 2020 [systematic review](#) of student health and wellbeing, published by Evidence for Learning.

Currently, most of the evidence regarding Social and Emotional Learning ('SEL') is focused on intervention programs with little guidance on the types of strategies or practices that teachers can integrate into their everyday teaching. The evidence review aimed to summarise what is known about the former, and to conduct new analysis on the latter, in order that this guidance can provide recommendations on both structured programs and everyday teaching practices.

More information about the report and how it was produced is provided in the [How was this guide compiled?](#) section.

This guidance provides recommendations on both structured programs and everyday teaching practices.

Who is this guide for?

This report is intended for primary schools. It is aimed primarily at senior leaders who are thinking about their school's approach to SEL, and at primary teachers and support staff. Further audiences who may find the guidance relevant include other staff within schools who are responsible for student's social and emotional development (for example, health and physical education, wellbeing, and inclusion co-ordinators), school councils, parents, program developers, teacher educators, educational researchers and those who support evidence use in schools.

Acting on the guidance

The recommendations in this Guidance Report provide a starting point for school leaders to critically review how they support student's social and emotional development. This could include auditing their current approach to Health and Physical Education (HPE) or personal and social capabilities¹ and how it links to classroom teaching, their behaviour management or anti-bullying policies, or their training and support for staff. If schools have bought a SEL program, it might prompt them to consider if it is as promising as hoped, and how it might be implemented more effectively—or replaced.

Additional resources to support the implementation of the recommendations made in this report will be developed. Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report, [Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#), can also support teachers and senior staff to apply the recommendations in a practical way in their own schools. Evidence for Learning's other Guidance Reports, particularly those on [Metacognition and self-regulated learning](#) and [Working with parents to support children's learning](#) are also relevant.

Further support to apply the recommendations from this Guidance Report is contained in [Recommendation 6](#) and additional support outlined in the [Acting on the evidence](#) and [Further reading](#) sections.

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

For the purposes of this Guidance Report, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process through which students learn 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.² There are a range of other terms that schools use that overlap with SEL (though have different emphases), including: supporting student's mental health and wellbeing; character education; development of student's resilience; bullying prevention; life skills; behaviour management; personal development; and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Throughout this report we refer to 'SEL', as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), as this definition is widely used. It consists of five core competencies (see [Table 1](#)).³ These are skills that have been linked to a range of positive outcomes,⁴ as explained in more detail in the section below. While not every factor contributing to SEL is explicit in [Table 1](#), these competencies are consistent with the elements within the personal and social capability dimension of the Australian Curriculum's General Capabilities.¹



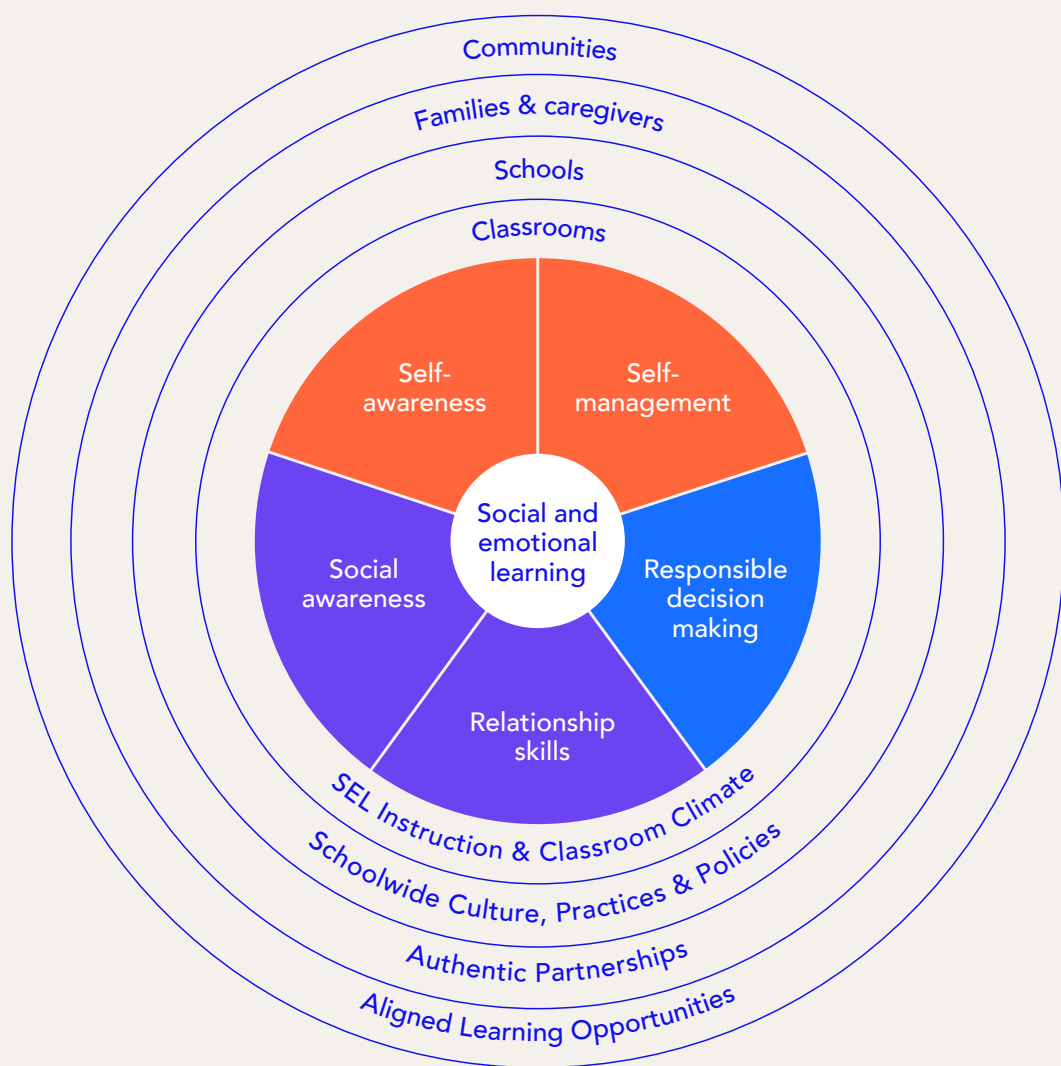


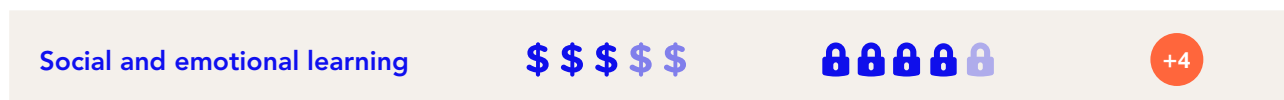
Figure 1: The CASEL Skills framework (Adapted from CASEL, 2020)³

Table 1: Competencies, capacities and skills at the heart of SEL (Adapted from CASEL³ and ACARA¹)

Core competency	Definition	Associated Capacities and Skills
Self-awareness	The ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognise one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate honesty, integrity and values • Examine prejudices and biases • Develop a growth mindset • Hold interests and a sense of purpose • Identify personal characteristics • Recognise emotions • Recognise personal qualities and achievements • Understand themselves as learners • Develop reflective practice.
Self-management	The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal/collective goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage one's emotions and express them appropriately • Identify and use stress-management strategies • Develop self-discipline and self-motivation • Set personal and collective goals • Use planning and organisational skills • Demonstrate personal and collective agency • Work independently and show initiative • Become confident, resilient and adaptable.
Social awareness	The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathise with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognise family, school, and community resources and supports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take others' perspectives • Recognise strengths in others • Demonstrate empathy and compassion • Show concern for the feelings of others • Understand and expressing gratitude • Appreciate diverse social perspectives, including unjust ones • Recognise situational demands and opportunities • Understand the influences of organisations/systems on behaviour • Contribute to civil society • Understand relationships.

Relationship skills	<p>The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate effectively • Develop positive relationships • Demonstrate cultural competency • Practice teamwork and collaborative problem-solving • Negotiate and resolve conflicts constructively • Resist negative social pressure • Show leadership in groups • Seek or offer support and help when needed • Stand up for the rights of others.
Responsible decision-making	<p>The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate curiosity and open-mindedness • Identify solutions for personal and social problems • Learn to make a reasoned judgment after analysing information, data, evidence and facts • Anticipate and evaluate the consequences of actions • Recognise how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school • Reflect on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being • Evaluate personal, interpersonal and community impacts • Make ethical decisions.

Figure 2: Evidence reviews including over 700 studies show that on average SEL has a positive impact on academic attainment, equivalent to 4 additional months' progress.



Why do social and emotional skills matter?

There is extensive evidence associating childhood social and emotional skills with enhanced outcomes at school and in later life, in relation to improved physical and mental health, increased school readiness and academic achievement, reduced propensity towards crime, and expanded employment and income prospects.^{5,6,7,8}

There is also evidence that student's skills can be improved purposefully through school-based SEL programs, and that these impacts can persist over time.^{4,9} Numerous large evidence reviews^{10,11} indicate that, when well implemented, SEL can have positive impacts on a range of outcomes, including:

- Improved social and emotional skills;
- improved academic performance (see Figure 2);
- improved attitudes, behaviour and relationships with peers and teachers;
- reduced emotional distress (student depression, anxiety, stress and social withdrawal);
- improved recovery from trauma and distress evoked emergencies, conflict and disaster;
- reduced levels of bullying;
- reduced conduct problems; and
- improved school connection.

Efforts to promote SEL skills may be especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who on average have weaker SEL skills at all ages than their more advantaged peers.¹² This matters for a range of outcomes, as lower levels of SEL skills are associated with poorer mental health and academic attainment.^{13,14}

There is also evidence to suggest that the benefits of SEL may extend to teachers and to the school environment, including a less disruptive and more positive classroom climate, and teachers reporting lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, better

relationships with their students, and higher confidence in their teaching.¹⁵ For example, in one survey, 72% of UK teachers said that teaching SEL had improved their own relationships with their students.¹⁶

Longitudinal research in the UK has shown that good social and emotional skills—including self-regulation, self-awareness, and social skills – developed by the age of ten, are predictors of a range of adult outcomes (age 42), such as life satisfaction and wellbeing, labour market success, and good overall health.¹²

It is important to note that most of the evidence to date is from the UK and US, and emphasise the importance of how SEL is implemented.¹⁷ As such, schools should think carefully about how recommended approaches apply to their own contexts. This is discussed in the recommendations that follow.

How does SEL relate to mental health?

Social and emotional skills are protective factors for mental health. They equip students with the tools and resources to address mental health challenges that interfere with life, learning and wellbeing (for example, difficulty regulating emotions, concentrating, and interacting with peers).^{18,19} Indeed, recent research has shown that SEL skills at the age of nine predicted test scores at age 11 (controlling for prior attainment), via their influence on mental health difficulties in the interim.²⁰

However, SEL does not replace the need for comprehensive systems and services for students with mental health difficulties; rather, SEL provides a foundation that promotes the development of competencies in all students and is a means to build protective school environments, and support early and intensive interventions for students who need additional targeted help.²¹

What does SEL look like in Australian schools, and how does it relate to the Australian curriculum?

There are many ways to develop social and emotional skills in primary schools, which can range from explicit teaching in lessons, to school-wide initiatives, to less intensive practices that teachers integrate into their everyday teaching. Optimally, SEL approaches occur at one of three levels:

- **School culture and environment:** whole-school (for example, all-staff training, school-wide efforts to reduce bullying or improve school ethos);
- **Universal:** whole-class (for example, an explicitly taught weekly classroom curriculum, or integrated strategies); and
- **Targeted/intensive:** targeted (for example, individual or group-based support for students with greater needs).

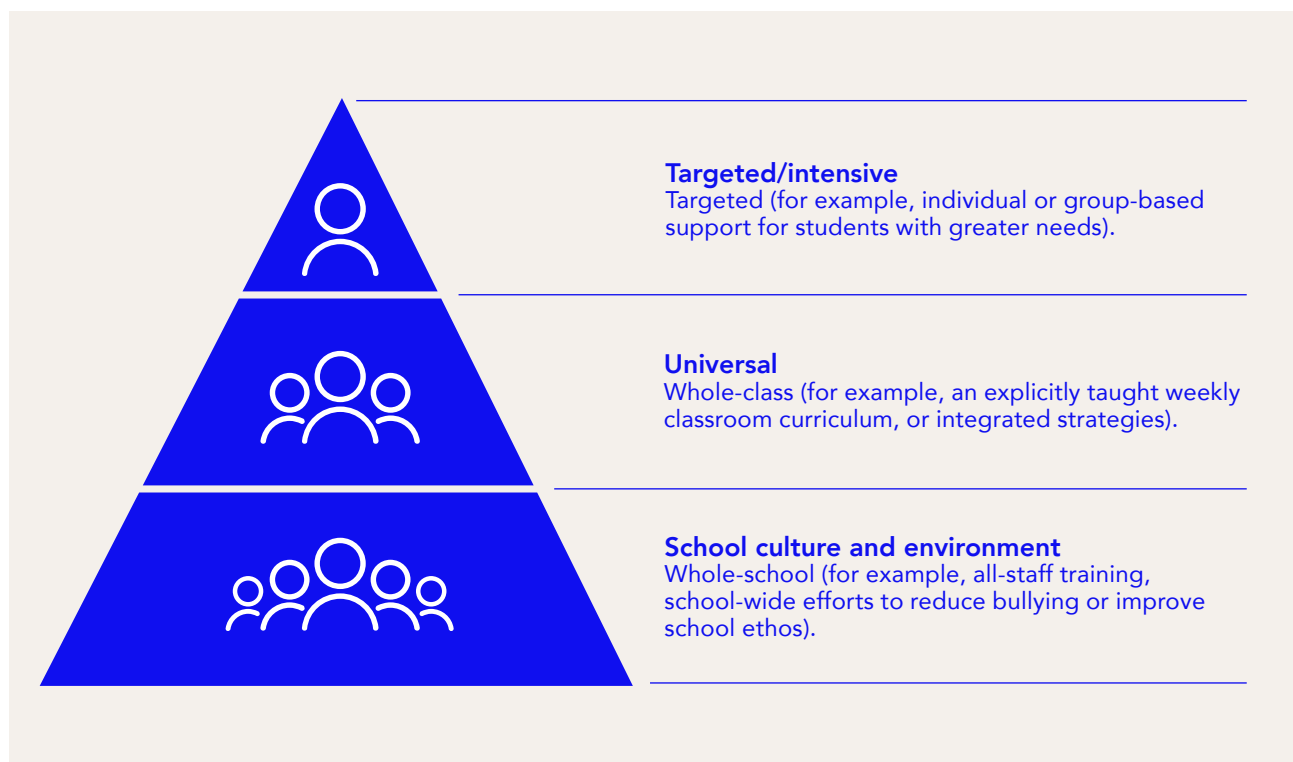
This guidance focuses on whole-school and selected whole-class approaches, because more intensive, targeted approaches were outside the scope of the review, and are likely to require more specialist input. Recommendations 1–4 particularly focus

on change that can occur in the classroom, whilst Recommendations 5 and 6 focus on the whole school, and implementing change.

High quality HPE teaching will aim to develop student's skills whilst also building knowledge about particular aspects of life, for example, physical health or safety.¹ HPE can therefore provide valuable contexts in which to teach social and emotional learning. However, more effective SEL approaches do not exist only as isolated programs within HPE.

The General Capabilities, developed by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), will support teachers in delivering SEL within the classroom. Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, and Critical and Creative Thinking all have relevance and alignment with the explicit SEL skills discussed in this report. More information about the General Capabilities can be found in the [Further reading](#) section.

The guidance that follows aims to support schools in integrating high quality SEL throughout the school, considering the priorities and challenges that schools have identified.



Summary of recommendations

Teaching strategies

1



Teach SEL skills explicitly

- Use a range of strategies to teach key skills, both in dedicated time, and in everyday teaching.
- Self-awareness: expand student's emotional vocabulary and support them to express emotions.
- Self-monitoring: teach students to use self-calming strategies and positive self-talk to help deal with intense emotions.
- Social awareness: use stories to discuss others' emotions and perspectives.
- Relationship skills: role play good communication and listening skills.
- Responsible decision-making: teach and practise problem-solving strategies.

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2



Integrate and model SEL skills through everyday teaching

- Model the social and emotional behaviours you want students to adopt.
- Give specific and focused feedback when students display SEL skills.
- Do not rely on 'crisis moments' for teaching skills.
- Embed SEL teaching across a range of subject areas: literacy, history, drama and HPE all provide good opportunities to link to SEL.
- Use simple ground-rules in groupwork and classroom discussion to reinforce SEL skills.

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Curriculum

3



Plan carefully for adopting a SEL program

- Use a planned series of lessons to teach skills in dedicated time.
- Adopting an evidence-based program is likely to be a better bet than developing a bespoke approach.
- Explore and prepare carefully before adopting a program—review what is required to deliver it, and whether it is suitable for your needs and context.
- Use evidence summaries as a quick way of assessing the evidence for programs.
- Once underway, regularly review progress, and adapt with care.

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Whole School

Implementation

4



Use a SAFE curriculum:
Sequential, Active, Focused
and Explicit

- Ensure your curriculum builds skills sequentially across lessons and year groups. Start early and think long term.
- Balance teacher-led activities with active forms of learning, such as: role-play, discussion and small group work, to practice skills.
- Focus your time: consider quality and quantity. Brief regular instruction appears more effective than infrequent long sessions.
- Be explicit: clearly identify the skills that are being taught and why they are important.

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5



Reinforce SEL skills through
whole-school ethos and activities

- Establish schoolwide norms, expectations and routines that support student's social and emotional development.
- Align your school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies with SEL.
- Seek ideas and support from staff and students in how the school environment can be improved.
- Actively engage with families to reinforce skills in the home environment.

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6



Plan, support, and monitor
SEL implementation

- Establish a shared vision for SEL: ensure it is connected to rather than competing with other school priorities.
- Involve teachers and school staff in planning for SEL.
- Provide training and support to all school staff, covering: readiness for change; development of skills and knowledge; and support for embedding change.
- Prioritise implementation quality: teacher preparedness and enthusiasm for SEL are associated with better outcomes.
- Monitor implementation and evaluate the impact of your approaches.

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This recommendation describes simple activities and routines that teachers can use to develop particular social and emotional skills. Recent research suggests that supporting teachers to develop and use a repertoire of strategies is likely to be an efficient way of improving SEL provision without relying on dedicated wellbeing staff or external providers.^{22,23,24} The strategies in this chapter have been identified from evidence-based programs, and can be used flexibly:

- as part of planned time dedicated to SEL;
- integrated into everyday class teaching; and
- to complement a more structured program (see [Recommendation 3](#)).

Some strategies (e.g. the use of stories) may feel familiar to teachers, but the key element is in making the teaching of SEL skills more frequent, purposeful and explicit.²⁵ Some strategies will be easier to align with everyday class teaching; others will fit more naturally into standalone HPE sessions. The recommendation is focused around the five core SEL skills described in the introduction to this guidance. In each case we describe what is meant by the skill, why it matters, and strategies and examples that could be used for developing the skill.

It is important to note that whilst there is growing research promoting such strategies, and they have been drawn from evidence-based approaches, they have not been evaluated as standalone strategies, so schools need to judge which approaches are suitable for them and are effective in their contexts.

A. Activities to enhance student's self-awareness

What do we mean by self-awareness?

Self-awareness is concerned with the ability to recognise our emotions and thoughts, and to understand how they influence our behaviour. It also means being aware of our strengths and having a belief in oneself ('self-efficacy'). Self-awareness is influenced by identity, community and culture, so knowing students is an important step towards supporting students to develop self-awareness. Good self-awareness is associated with reduced difficulties in social functioning and fewer externalising problems, in particular aggression.²⁶ Two areas that teachers can support are student's knowledge of emotions, and ability to express emotions.

Examples of activities used to develop student's self-awareness

Knowledge of emotions

Teachers can help students label and recognise emotions through explicit vocabulary teaching ('putting feelings into words'), and activities that give students the opportunity to practise using this language in real contexts through games, stories, and other activities. For example:

- using story books to discuss how characters feel and why;
- using games to develop student's vocabulary e.g. miming activities where students guess a feeling that is being portrayed ('emotional charades'); and
- using mirrors, photographs and pictures to talk about what happens to people's faces and bodies when they are experiencing particular emotions: for example, students might match photographs displaying different emotions with emotion labels and scenario labels.



Emotional expression

Student's ability to recognise and express emotions can be supported with a class display, which is regularly referenced (see Box 1). Teachers can also develop student's ability to tell others how they are feeling by, for example:

- teaching them to use 'I' messages (articulating how you feel and why): 'I feel x because...'
- providing supportive prompts to students who have difficulty talking about their emotions, such as: 'It looks like you might be feeling sad, can you tell me what happened?'. The simple act of naming the emotion can help students understand it more clearly.
- explaining to students that all feelings are okay, but the behaviours they lead to may not be okay. It is okay to feel angry, for example, but not okay to act in ways that hurt others.



Box 1: Feelings display

Create a 'feelings display' in the classroom (for example, feelings tree with the leaves as different feelings words, emoticon board, feelings wheel, poster or dictionary). The teacher can introduce the vocabulary in the display, and then use the display in many ways on an ongoing basis, for example:

'You feel happy? Is there another word on our feelings wheel that you could use?'

'We have learned a new feelings word today– What does it mean to feel frustrated? Can you think of a time you might feel frustrated?'

Teachers can also use the display to support emotional expression, for example, by having students place their name or photo on a relevant emotion within the feelings display to indicate how they are feeling when they come into the classroom in the morning, or at the start of the afternoon.²⁷ Teachers may also make reference to the display in describing their own emotions: *'This is beginning to make me frustrated, because you're talking whilst I am trying to explain something important to you.'*

Teachers should consider the complexity of emotions and discuss with students that they might be feeling more than one of these emotions simultaneously.





B. Activities to enhance student's self-management

What do we mean by self-management (self-regulation)?

The terms 'self-management' and 'self-regulation' refer to the ability to understand and regulate our emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in different situations. It includes being able to:

- regulate or manage reactions to emotions like frustration, anxiety, or excitement;
- calm down after something exciting or upsetting;
- focus on a task; and
- control impulses.

The development of self-management skills enables students to behave in socially acceptable ways by, for example, giving them the ability to take turns, share, and express emotions (such as anger or frustration) in appropriate ways.^{28,29} Self-regulation of emotions complements self-regulated learning, which is discussed in Evidence for Learning's Guidance Reports on *Metacognition and self-regulated learning*, and *Improving literacy in lower primary, upper primary and secondary*.

Examples of activities used to develop student's self-regulation skills

- Brainstorm together ways in which students might deal with strong emotions, for example, by counting to ten, walking away, telling someone how you feel and why, asking someone for help.
- Teach students self-calming strategies. For example: show students how they can use deep breathing to calm themselves (see Box 2 for an example).
- Teach students positive self-talk. When students experience a strong emotion such as anger, often there is an underlying thought (self-talk) accompanying this emotion which intensifies how they are feeling ("I've been left out...no one likes me"). When self-talk is negative, students can get angry, frustrated, or anxious more easily. Teach students to use positive-self talk (helpful thoughts) to calm their emotions.

- Recognise body cues. Help students to become aware of early physiological signs of strong emotions and encourage them to talk about how they are feeling. Examples of physiological signs include: heart beating, face getting hot, sweaty palms, knees or hands shaking, tone of voice, facial expression, and rapid breathing.
- Use images and metaphors to help student's understanding (see Box 2). For example, students might watch a balloon blown up until it bursts, or learn about volcanic eruptions, then discuss how they might notice angry feelings building up inside themselves, and make a class poster of steps they can take to avoid an 'anger explosion'.

Box 2: Self-calming strategy

The 'Turtle Technique' is a strategy that is taught formally in evidence-based prevention programs such as the Incredible Years and PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies). The aim is to help students calm themselves when they feel angry. It is based on empirical observations of the relationship among physiological measures, behaviour, and student's emotional states.²³ It involves the teacher explaining to students how a turtle can retreat into its shell, and suggest they can do this too when they are angry (perhaps putting their head down, or holding themselves). In their shell, they can take three deep breaths and think calming thoughts, such as: 'I can calm down.' They come out of their shell when calm and ready to think of solutions to the problem. An adaptation for older students (Years 4-6) has been called 'Fingers Linked, Time to Think'.



C. Activities to enhance student's social awareness

What do we mean by social awareness?

Social awareness refers to the ability to understand the perspective of others and empathise. In the early years of life, students are naturally more egocentric and more inclined to think about themselves and their own needs. Understanding the perspectives of others and developing a sense of empathy are considered fundamental building blocks for the positive development and mental health of students.³⁰ Longitudinal research has shown that good social skills—including high levels of empathy—developed by the age of ten, are predictors of a range of adult outcomes (age 42), such as life satisfaction and wellbeing, labour market success, and good overall health.¹²

Examples of activities and strategies used to develop student's social awareness

Identifying another person's emotions and perspective

- Use 'hot seating', in which one child plays a character and the rest of the class asks them questions about their feelings and how those feelings influence the choices they make.
- Circle time. Use everyday classroom scenarios during circle time to explore how awareness of the feelings of others can help to develop student's empathy skills e.g. 'Paul forgot his lunch today, how does this make him feel?'; 'I (the teacher) was running late for school this morning, how do you think this made me feel? How could you tell I was flustered?'
- Use literature, poetry, film and real-life accounts to help students understand the feelings of those who feel bullied, or different, or lonely, or what it feels like to experience difficult events. Ask if they have ever felt the same way.^{31,32} (See Box 3 for an example.)
- Encourage self-reflective questioning—such as, 'What would I have done in that situation?' This is a metacognitive technique that allows students to evaluate actions, promotes self-reflection, and develops their use of self-talk. This is commonly taught in evidence-based SEL programs.¹¹

Box 3: Discuss what it means to be an ally

Ask students to each write about a situation where they have experienced a strong emotion. After doing this, ask students to swap accounts and write a brief summary of what emotion the other child was feeling. Working together, they then record three things an ally could do to help someone in that situation. To draw connections with other subjects, in a follow-up history lesson, they could consider what it means to be an ally to another nation, and how this is different or similar to being an ally to someone in school. This example is drawn from the Second Step program.¹¹

The Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships resources will support schools to select stage-appropriate activities to understand what it means to be an ally.





D. Activities to enhance student's relationship skills

What do we mean by relationship skills?

Relationship skills are concerned with our ability to interact positively with peers and adults, and to effectively navigate social situations.²⁵

Examples of activities and strategies used to develop student's relationship skills

Communication skills

The teacher can begin by demonstrating poor communication techniques and the class can discuss some of the issues with the teacher's form of communication—for example, arms folded, not looking at the person they are speaking to, being distracted while talking, shouting at the person, interrupting them, rolling eyes, mumbling, shrugging shoulders*, and so on.

Students can brainstorm and model good communication techniques—for example, appropriate eye contact*, not distracted, using facial expressions or nodding to demonstrate you're listening, not interrupting the person when they are speaking, seeking clarification, asking a question or giving an opinion when the other person has finished speaking, and summarising what they have said and checking you have got it right.

Students in pairs can role-play scenarios and identify ways in which they can improve their communication skills. Sample scenarios include trying to join in a game out in the playground, trying to get the teacher's attention in class, or talking to a parent whilst playing on a phone.

Students can identify and practise the skills needed for working in groups and teams—such as building on one another's contributions, making sure everyone can contribute, probing to check understanding, and trying to reach a shared agreement. They can use sentence stems – such as 'I agree because...', 'I disagree because...'—to support their discussions.

Box 4: Class rules

There is evidence that when students are actively involved in developing the class rules and norms, they are likely to take greater responsibility for following them.^{33,34} Teachers can draft class rules together with the students, which set out the behaviours and expectations that are important for the class—for example, listening when others are speaking, taking turns, being willing to work together, and respecting different opinions. This might include getting students to generate ideas and discuss the pros and cons of different rules and why they are important. This is a good activity to do at the start of the year with a new class, but can also be re-visited during the year, particularly to address issues that arise. This activity is used in a program called Incredible Years —Teacher Classroom Management.²⁷

Relationship building

- Role play can be used to demonstrate ways to interact with friends in different circumstances—for example, introducing yourself, taking turns, asking to share, or dealing with conflict. Scenarios involving joining a new class, or club, and welcoming newcomers to such a group, can also be explored.
- Circle time is a useful means to discuss relationship-building and accepting difference with students. The class could, for example, discuss a) ways in which we can make new friends; b) what makes a good friend and how we can show we are being a good friend to someone else; c) how can we be a friend to someone who is left out, ignored, or teased; and d) what are the things we do that can damage a friendship?

* Schools should use their knowledge of their students and community to understand the variation in cultures and how respect is signalled and communicated.



- Group work can be used to practise skills in a new context. For example, have students partner up and work on projects together, assign them a task, and remind them about good communication and listening skills.
- Discussing the expectations of the classroom can be a useful way for developing communication and relationship skills, as well as wider SEL skills (see [Box 4](#)).

E. Activities to enhance student's responsible decision making

What do we mean by responsible decision making?

Responsible decision making is concerned with student's ability to problem solve and make constructive choices. In order to do this, students need to learn how to evaluate a situation, think about possible solutions and consider the potential consequences of these options for themselves and others. Many of the General Capabilities intersect with responsible decision making, including ethical understanding, intercultural understanding, and personal and social capability.¹

Students who employ appropriate problem-solving strategies play more constructively, have better relationships with peers and are more cooperative at home and school.^{35,36} Students can be taught to use appropriate problem-solving strategies that improve their decision-making processes.²⁴

An approach to problem-solving

Problem-solving involves using the emotional identification and communication strategies discussed earlier. Here are steps to problem-solving that you can teach students, drawn from a range of evidence-based SEL programs:²⁷

1. Identify the problem. Help students to articulate the problem out loud—for example, 'You don't have anyone to play with?'. Help students to think about how this is making them feel, and to understand the feelings of other people involved in the situation.
2. Brainstorm solutions. Help students to generate solutions to the problem situation. Young students may not be able to come up with their own solutions, but teachers can support their thinking with questions such as 'What could we do to make the situation better? What kinds of things could you do that would help you and the other people involved to feel better?' With practice, students will gradually be able to come up with more of their own solutions.
3. Identify the pros and cons of each solution. Help students identify potential positive and negative consequences for each potential solution they identified.
4. Pick a solution. Encourage students to pick a solution. When thinking about a good solution, ask questions such as: 'Is this a safe solution? Is it fair? Does it lead to good feelings?' It might be helpful to create some solution cards that you can discuss with them, such as: 'Ask someone for help'; 'Shout'; 'Say sorry'; 'Walk away'; 'Tell the other person how you are feeling and why'; 'Ask nicely' and so on.
5. Test it out. Encourage students to try out their solution and see what happens. If it doesn't work out, they can try another solution from the list developed. Give students lots of support if the solution does not work, including prompting the use of alternative strategies, and providing the opportunity to reflect.



It is best to begin problem-solving when students are calm and relaxed. If a child is very anxious or angry, help them to calm down first (quiet time, taking deep breaths) or leave problem-solving for another day when you know the child is ready to participate. When you encounter behavioural issues in your classroom, try to resolve them together using a problem-solving approach. Where a child has behaved inappropriately, re-run the scenario with them later to help them identify alternative courses of action. Box 5 provides an example related to problem-solving and goal setting.

Box 5: Identifying barriers to goals, and how to overcome them

This activity starts with the teacher providing a written vignette detailing a goal and a problem preventing the goal from being reached. Students then work together to identify the goal, identify the barrier and identify how the character is feeling.¹¹ They may also brainstorm potential solutions. The approach can then be extended to apply to the students themselves, and a goal they have at school:

1. students start by identifying a feasible goal they wish to achieve in the coming weeks;
2. they then reflect on achieving the outcome;
3. they then identify a likely barrier to them achieving it; and
4. plan for what they would do if that barrier arose – ‘if x obstacle arises, then I will do y’.

This framework has been described as ‘Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan’ (‘WOOP’). There is evidence from small trials that helping students to set goals, identify potential barriers, and anticipate ‘if...then...’ solutions in this way can lead to better outcomes than a comparison group who are encouraged simply to think positively about achieving goals.^{37,38}

Finding a balance between structure and flexibility – teaching SEL competencies

Our Lady’s School, Craigieburn



At Our Lady’s School, the leadership have developed an approach to teaching SEL skills which balances structure with flexibility. The model is the result of trialing multiple approaches over the past few years. Structured sessions, delivered for an hour each week, are designed in team planning meetings. The SEL lessons aim to cover the key competences of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) in a way that is responsive to shifting student needs.

Regular team meetings are used to highlight which areas to focus on next, based on observations and information brought to the meetings by staff and leadership. Once areas have been selected, the planning is led by the school’s student wellbeing leader, and staff are supported to deliver these sessions.

As classroom teachers are responsible for the delivery of explicit SEL lessons, these concepts are drawn into other areas of the school day, both in proactive approaches to reinforce the skills, and when responding to issues or challenges when they arise.

A key element of the success that Our Lady’s School has experienced has been the scaffolding and support provided to teachers, including the development of lesson plans, guides and other resources led by the leadership and student wellbeing team.



Recommendation 1 provided example activities that schools can use to develop social and emotional skills explicitly – explaining the strategies themselves. This Recommendation provides ideas on how to embed such skills in the course of everyday teaching. The end goal of SEL is that students use the knowledge and skills they are taught as part of their daily interactions with peers and adults. The teaching of skills is therefore likely to have greater and longer-term impacts when it is integrated into everyday classroom interactions, and across subjects, than when skills are taught in isolation.^{39,22} Teachers and other school staff can support student's skill development by purposefully seeking out opportunities to model, recognise, and practice SEL skills.

Model the behaviours you want students to adopt

In addition to explicit teaching, students learn by observing other people, getting ideas about how new behaviours are formed, and using the ideas to guide their actions.⁴⁰ Teachers navigate stressful situations nearly every day, and students are watching, and learning from the way teachers manage frustration, maintain control of themselves and the classroom, and stay focused in the face of distractions.⁴¹

Modelling—or demonstrating appropriate behaviours—teaches and enhances student's social and emotional skills.^{24,42} How teachers and other adults in school speak to each other, to parents and to students—demonstrating attentive listening, for example, or how to speak to someone who is upset— can model a respectful relationship.

Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report on *Metacognition and self-regulated learning* provides examples of how teachers can use modelling to reveal the thinking processes of an expert learner. Similarly, teachers can model their own thinking and feelings explicitly as they approach a task or respond to a situation to reveal the processes that support effective decision-making and interaction. For example, when faced with a problem—classroom IT that is needed for an activity but isn't functioning correctly—the teacher might model aloud the immediate response of frustration, and demonstrate the problem-solving approach, staying calm, taking a deep breathe, thinking through the options aloud, and coming up with a solution for a new activity.





Use 'teachable moments' for embedding skills

Even more than academic skills, social and emotional skills develop in the context of daily life as social challenges and other teaching opportunities arise.²² School staff can use real life classroom and playground situations to apply SEL strategies and skills in 'real-time', providing opportunities for using the example strategies set out in [Recommendation 1](#). For example, a teacher or other adult might:

- support students to think through others' perspectives and use specific problem-solving skills during a disagreement in the playground;
- encourage the class to discuss and try to solve ongoing problems that are affecting the whole group—for example, some students feeling excluded or ignored; or
- give specific and focused feedback on seeing students applying SEL learning—for example, 'I noticed that you managed to calm yourself in a difficult situation... Well done!'. Using language that builds student's self-efficacy draws their attention to strategies they have used to help themselves.

Paying attention to positive behaviours is an effective strategy for reinforcing skills,⁴³ and it is relatively easy to build into the everyday classroom environment. This can be supplemented by recognition and rewards related to positive social and emotional behaviour.⁴⁴

Do not rely on 'crisis moments' for teaching skills

In busy schools we often do not think explicitly about student's social and emotional skills until a problem arises (such as an incident of bullying). While such problems can provide important contexts for teaching and reinforcing skills, if they are the only time that skills are discussed, students may perceive skills to be solely about avoiding poor behaviour. Such individual incidents can also be sensitive and difficult for communicating broader lessons.

Although it can be difficult to make time, taking a preventative approach—discussing issues such as bullying before they arise, and providing students with strategies they can draw on—is likely to make crisis moments easier to deal with when they do arise, and lead to more effective resolutions.

Embed SEL teaching across subject areas

Teaching SEL skills in the context of the wider curriculum is engaging and helps students to apply what they have learnt. The suggestion here is not to replace core curriculum teaching on knowledge and skills, but to identify opportunities for linking and embedding SEL skills in ways that complement everyday teaching. Many areas of the curriculum offer opportunities for SEL. For example:

- In English lessons, students can use stories as the basis for discussing characters' feelings and motivations, extending a normal inference activity (see [Box 6](#)).
- In language lessons students can develop an understanding of others' perspectives and feelings based on real events. For example, students learning Auslan might discuss or write about what it might be like to navigate a society as a member of the Deaf community.¹
- In science lessons, students might explore experiments through collaborative learning activities, and reflect on their approach to working collaboratively.
- In HPE students might explore the features of effective teamwork or discuss what it feels like to lose a game and how to respond constructively.
- In performing arts lessons, a rehearsal can provide opportunities for role-play, and practice of emotional expression, such as how we convey or recognise emotions.



Teachers report that integrating SEL into academic content is associated with improved learning, and that integrating SEL across a range of subjects appears to be more likely when teachers are involved in introducing the SEL provision in their school (rather than having it imposed as a school policy, when SEL is more likely to be taught only in discrete time).¹⁶

Provide support for effective group work and classroom talk

The effects of SEL work can be amplified through classrooms that help students to practise their skills in their everyday interactions.⁴⁵ For example, collaborative (or cooperative) learning approaches may be particularly beneficial for supporting students' peer interactions.⁴⁶ Such approaches typically involve students working together on activities or learning tasks in groups small enough for everyone to participate on a collective task that has been clearly assigned. The impact of collaborative approaches on learning is consistently positive, with approaches promoting talk and interaction between learners linked to greater gains.⁴⁷

Structured whole-class discussion also provides opportunities for students to practise social and emotional skills, including grappling with multiple perspectives, communicating effectively, and disagreeing respectfully. Teachers can support this by establishing ground rules for talk, as well as acting as a guide and facilitator by using well-designed questions to draw out students' thinking, modelling effective communication, and supporting students to build on one another's contributions. For example, a ground-rule during a discussion could be: 'you need to reference a class-mate's name and contribution in your response...' to encourage active listening and a cumulative dialogue. There is evidence that such approaches to improving the quality of classroom talk can improve academic and non-academic outcomes (see Box 7 for an example).^{48,49,50}

Box 6: Identifying others' emotions and perspectives—linking SEL and reading comprehension

To connect the characters and situations in a book with the student's experiences, the Year 3 teacher plans to read a passage from the book at least twice. During the second reading, he asks questions that a) increase student's emotional vocabulary; b) prompt reflective self-questioning; and c) ask students to link the story to their own circumstances:

- 'What do you think the characters are feeling?'
- 'How can you tell they are feeling this way?'
- 'How would you solve the problem?'
- 'Can you use words from the story to explain how you feel when you...?'
- 'What could we do differently if this happens in our classroom?'

Such open-ended questions enable students to link fictional texts to their own experiences, learn new vocabulary, and practice applying social and emotional skills. Any negative responses (for example, fighting as an appropriate response) should be talked through and alternative positive responses provided. Students can reflect upon and share similar experiences. As an extension, students could then rewrite the story to show how they would have reacted to the problem. This example is drawn from a range of evidence-based programs that use stories and scenarios to prompt reflection and discussion.



Box 7: Philosophy for Children

In Philosophy for Children (P4C), structured group discussions are prompted by a stimulus (for example, a story or a video) and are based around a concept such as 'truth', 'fairness', or 'bullying'. The aim of P4C is to help students become more willing and able to ask questions, construct arguments, and engage in reasoned discussion. P4C is not normally thought of as a 'SEL program', however many of the discussion topics are very relevant to SEL, and teachers and students involved have reported that it has had a beneficial impact on outcomes such as students' confidence to speak, patience when listening to others, self-esteem, communication and teamwork.⁴⁹ There is also evidence that P4C has an impact on academic outcomes, including reading and maths.⁵¹ This is currently being tested through a large EEF evaluation in primary schools.

Adopting characters to develop social awareness

Holy Saviour Parish School, Vermont South



In performing arts classes at Holy Saviour Parish School, students engage in an activity called 'hot-spotting'. Students are assigned characters, often linked with their current literacy learning. Each student then conducts background reading and steps into the shoes of their character, engaging in discussions from their character's perspective.

The discussions are structured to elicit emotions, reflection, and self-awareness, aligned to the general capabilities and arts curriculum at each year level. The themes for the hot-spotting activity draw primarily from wider themes being explored through the personal and social capabilities in inquiry units.

Structures used within the class during hot-spotting are mirrored in staff professional learning sessions to provide classroom teachers with insight from experienced arts staff, and to bridge the learning occurring in the arts and learning areas delivered by the classroom teacher.



Recommendations 1 and 2 focused on flexible teaching strategies that can be adapted to schools' needs. This recommendation focuses on structured programs as a way of delivering a SEL curriculum—as such, they can be a 'vehicle' for introducing a wide range of practices and strategies, such as those mentioned in Recommendations 1 and 2, in a planned and deliberate way.

There is extensive international evidence that teaching SEL through planned programs can have a positive impact on student's attitudes to learning, relationships in school, academic attainment, and a range of other outcomes. However, not all programs are effective, and care needs to be taken by schools in selecting and implementing an approach that is suitable to their needs and context: planning is also needed to ensure the quality of delivery.

Use a planned series of lessons to teach skills in dedicated time

Typically, 'social and emotional learning programs' are delivered to all students in a classroom, usually by the class teachers, and consist of a series of lessons on topics such as identifying and labelling feelings, controlling impulses, and understanding the perspective of others. They are often introduced in the context of specific topics, such as: bullying prevention, friendship, health education, and staying safe (see [Box 8](#) for an example).⁵²

Common characteristics of effective SEL programs include:

- an explicit curriculum of scheduled lessons;
- a teacher's handbook or manual (ranging from broad principles to heavily scripted);
- resources (such as generic scenarios) for use with a whole class; and
- a lesson structure (indicating a sequenced and regular progression).

Consider the pros and cons of an externally developed program versus a bespoke approach

A question facing most schools is whether to adopt a structured SEL program (usually a named intervention, with training and materials), or develop their own approach. The benefits of selecting an externally developed program are that it should provide a coherent ready-made curriculum that is informed by theory and evidence.⁵³ The challenge is that such programs are typically more comprehensive, so may be more difficult to fit into the time available or may not fit with the specific context and needs of each school.

Overall, there is good evidence that structured SEL programs have a positive impact on student's outcomes.^{4,25} Seven large evidence reviews suggest that, on average, these programs have positive impacts on outcomes including social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, emotional distress, and academic achievement. As such, SEL programs represent an evidence-based approach that schools should consider carefully—they are likely to be a better bet than adopting a program without evidence, creating a new approach for your school from scratch, or doing nothing. For an overview of evidence-based programs, schools can use the Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook or explore the Be You Programs Directory – see [Further reading](#).

Some schools, however, will want to construct their own curriculum, building on their existing effective practice and tailored to their particular context. In this case it will be important to ensure coverage of the core skills at the heart of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making) in a carefully sequenced progression that follows the SAFE principles described in [Recommendation 4](#). Schools should also balance the potential limitations—the time taken to create a program, and limited evidence—against the benefits of increased tailoring and flexibility.



Plan carefully before adopting a program

Despite the good evidence of promise for SEL programs overall, the impact of individual programs varies substantially: simply adopting a SEL program—even one with a strong track record—is not a guarantee of success. Some recent evaluations of SEL programs in England, such as PATHS and FRIENDS for Life, have not reproduced the positive impacts that have been reported previously (see Box 8 for an example).^{54,55} It is therefore especially important to identify an approach that fits your needs and context, consider whether and how your school can implement it, and to plan carefully to deliver it with quality.

[Table 2](#) provides tips for selecting an effective SEL program, and questions that schools should ask before doing so. Successful implementation also requires ongoing review and response: intelligently adapting or tweaking delivery to fit your context, while remaining faithful to the core ‘active ingredients’ of the program.

Fidelity, acceptability and active ingredients are discussed further in [Recommendation 6](#) and in the [Acting on the evidence](#) section. For more information see Evidence for Learning’s Guidance Report [Putting evidence to work: a school’s guide to implementation](#).

Box 8: The promise and challenge of SEL programs — PATHS

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) aims to develop self-control, emotional understanding, positive self-esteem, relationships and interpersonal problem-solving in students aged 4–11. This is primarily delivered through a curriculum taught by the classroom teacher (approximately twice a week throughout the year), with lessons on topics such as identifying and labelling feelings, controlling impulses and understanding the perspectives of others. Teachers receive one and a half days’ training plus ongoing support. The curriculum is supplemented by activities that help students apply the lessons throughout the day, and provides links to the home environment.

Overall, PATHS has a strong international evidence base, including over ten RCTs.⁵⁶ However, not all evaluations of PATHS have been positive, and the quality of implementation seems to be important for outcomes. Three trials in the UK have found small and inconsistent effects. Of these, the most recent trial in 45 primary schools found ‘tentative evidence’ that PATHS improved some outcomes (social skills, perceptions of peer and social support, well-being, and reductions in exclusion), and represented value for money.⁵⁶ However, the evaluation was also cautious about the size and duration of these impacts. Implementation was a challenge: teachers struggled to fit all the PATHS lessons into their timetables, delivering lessons at half the recommended frequency. There was evidence that higher quality delivery of the program was associated with improved tests scores at upper primary (though this could have been due to better quality teaching overall rather than to PATHS).⁵⁴

In summary, while there has been some strong evidence of PATHS having an impact, other studies have been more tentative – quality of implementation appears important for outcomes, but is challenging to achieve given busy timetables. See [Table 2](#) and [Recommendation 6](#) for responses to this challenge.



Table 2: Considerations for selecting an effective program—explore and prepare

What to do	Questions to ask
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify your own aims and needs as a school. • Assess student’s SEL needs. • Audit your current activities and identify priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What social and emotional skills do we want to prioritise as a school? • What needs do our students have? • What is currently working well and not so well?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the strength of evidence for potential programs or approaches you’re considering: see the EIF Guidebook, EEF evaluations or the Be You Program Directory for evidence on some well-known programs (see Further reading). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has this approach been evaluated previously? • If so, how, where, on which age groups, and with what outcomes? • How similar is that context to my own?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the program content before adopting the approach to ensure that it matches your needs and priority areas for development. • Check sample activities and lesson plans (include teacher views in this assessment). • Consider piloting in one or two classes before adopting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the focus of the program? • What do activities consist of? • How do they match our school priorities/needs? • Does it follow the SAFE principles (see Recommendation 4)? • Is delivery feasible in our context? • Are teachers committed and enthusiastic?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about the time required for staff training and development. • Seek staff views on feasibility of implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training is required for staff? • Who needs to attend? • When and for how long?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure you can commit the time required to implement the program as it was intended. • Develop an action plan to support implementation. • Ensure you can achieve buy-in from all relevant participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we make time? • Who will deliver the program, and how often? • What additional/ongoing support is required to ensure effective delivery? Can we provide this?



A whole school program to develop SEL skills

St Francis of Assisi Catholic Primary School, Tarneit



Determined to improve academic growth for students, school leadership had explored the needs of students and determined that a introducing a more consistent model of SEL was a priority.

The school selected a wellbeing program with a strong SEL focus which had been implemented successfully in other schools and had been evaluated within Australia. To ensure the program was suited to St Francis of Assisi, school leadership facilitated consultations with staff and families.

Staff explored the research base in order to develop a full understanding of the effective features and importance of prioritising SEL.

The program guided staff to develop an explicit and contextually relevant curriculum around pro social skills that is explicitly taught weekly, which required a re-prioritisation to ensure dedicated time was etched out. A range of resources were collaboratively developed to support all staff, including a teacher's guide with a matrix linking on the school's values of respect, responsibility and safety. A coach provided additional mentoring to teachers, giving feedback through walk throughs and observations.

The SEL program is reinforced by other school-wide approaches including consistent routines, the school values and behaviour policies.

4

Use a SAFE curriculum: Sequential, Active, Focused and Explicit



As [Recommendation 3](#) makes clear, evidence to date on SEL supports the use of dedicated lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach social and emotional competencies. These can be effectively provided through an externally designed program. An alternative approach is to develop your own curriculum, focused on the core SEL skills and drawing on the evidence-informed practices described in [Recommendations 1](#) and [2](#). Whichever approach you adopt, ensuring your approach to SEL is Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit ('SAFE') is likely to improve outcomes. These principles are summarised in Box 9 and discussed further below.



Box 9: SAFE principles

In an analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs,²⁵ those that followed four key principles were found to have larger impacts on student's outcomes than those that did not.

1. Sequenced activities that lead in a coordinated and connected way to skill development. New behaviours and more complicated skills usually need to be broken down into smaller steps and sequentially mastered.
2. Active forms of learning that enable young people to practice and master new skills. This might include role play or behavioural rehearsal.
3. Focused time spent developing one or more social and emotional skills. Sufficient time and attention must be allocated for students to practice applying knowledge and skills.
4. Explicitly define and target specific skills. Programs should identify specific skills that they want students to develop, and teach these purposefully, rather than having a more general approach. See [Recommendation 1](#) for more detail on specific skills.

Sequence lessons to build skills progressively

As with any learning, new knowledge and more complicated skills need to be broken down into smaller steps and sequentially mastered. Schools' teaching of SEL should therefore aim to develop skills that are developmentally appropriate for each year group, in a coordinated and connected way.

'Sequencing' refers both to the development of content within each year, and across year groups.

A 'spiral curriculum' is a common feature of evidence-based SEL programs. It involves revisiting key concepts progressively in age-appropriate contexts as students get older, so that they are recalled, revisited and embedded.

Figure 3 shows how a particular area of social and emotional learning (expressing emotions appropriately) might evolve and become increasingly sophisticated across age groups. The strategies used to teach and practise the skills would also vary by age.



Figure 3: SEL capability – Expressing emotions appropriately (Adapted from ACARA¹)

Use active forms of learning

A series of whole-class SEL lessons might include a range of pedagogical strategies such as teacher-led instruction, pre-determined activities and discussion of a stimulus (such as a story or video). Evidence on SEL suggests that in combination with these approaches, it is particularly active forms of learning that have been associated with greater impacts, including interactive methods such as games, simulations, and small group work, which help students to practise using skills in real contexts.³⁹

Focus your time

Currently, less than a third of primary school teachers say that they have time dedicated to teaching SEL.¹⁶ Increasing this time is likely to be beneficial, though there are a number of considerations to balance what is effective and what is practically feasible:

- **Frequency and lesson length:** aim for 30–60 minutes per week. SEL programs with stronger evidence typically involve around one hour per week of instruction and practice. There is variation in how these are structured: some programs deliver 10–15 minutes per day, others recommend two sessions per week of 30 minutes. There is evidence that such regular instruction is more effective than infrequent long sessions.⁵⁷
- **Duration of program:** For school-wide SEL initiatives – think long term. There is little evidence to support very brief SEL interventions. Most evidence suggests SEL lessons should run for a year, with embedding, repetition, and increasing challenge in subsequent year groups. An exception to this rule is that some positive effects have been demonstrated in programs operating for 8–10 weeks for specific skills or for specific groups of students.^{58,59}
- **Consider both quality and quantity:** Increasing the quantity of explicit SEL teaching beyond one hour per week is unlikely to be feasible for most teachers. In fact, programs requiring more than 75 minutes per week for explicit teaching have been linked to weaker impacts than programs spending less than 75 minutes per week.⁶⁰ Some evaluations have found that quality of delivery (defined as teacher preparedness and enthusiasm) matters more to outcomes than the quantity (number of lessons delivered).⁵⁴

Be explicit about the skills you want students to develop

There is a great deal of variation in how SEL programs are designed and delivered, for example, in the length and intensity of program, focus or relative importance of a particular skill. However, efforts are not likely to be effective if they are based on loose guidelines and broad principles.³⁹ Schools need to be clear about which skills they are setting out to develop, and these skills should be made explicit: it is important that students know what they are being expected to learn.²⁵ For example, specific efforts to develop student's awareness of emotions (for example, by learning and practising the use of vocabulary related to emotions) are likely to be more beneficial in terms of skill development than a broader initiative on 'promoting well-being'. Recommendation 1 highlights specific skills that are worth focusing on.



When messages, routines and strategies are aligned across the classroom and whole-school setting, students learn and apply social and emotional skills more rapidly and more effectively.^{22,39} A large review of evidence related to SEL concludes that going beyond the curriculum to consider the whole school (for example, changes to school ethos, professional development, liaison with parents, community involvement, and coordinated work with outside agencies) is needed for maximising positive impacts.³⁹

However, the evidence underpinning the effectiveness of whole school approaches to SEL is less strong than the adoption of classroom-based SEL interventions;⁶¹ they are also more challenging to implement due to the number and complexity of school systems that need to be addressed. Nonetheless, whole-school practices can be developed incrementally, with commitment from school leadership, clarity about aims, starting small and with realistic expectations.⁶²

Establishing schoolwide expectations for SEL

School-wide norms and expectations are a set of agreed-upon principles that outline how everyone will behave and interact. Principles that take into account student's SEL development help to create a common language around how all staff and students will support each other socially and emotionally, for example, 'We listen to each other. We treat others as we want to be treated.'

Norms that simply hang on a poster in the classroom or school corridor will not create a positive school environment on their own; they need to be discussed and used to guide interactions and behaviour. Teachers and students must understand and be committed to the norms. In order for this to happen they should be developed collaboratively with staff, students and families (see [Box 10](#) for an example).

When deciding on school-wide norms, think about: what type of school do you want to be a part of, what might it look like, how might people interact with each other, solve problems, communicate, express their emotions, respect others? Look to frame school-wide norms in a positive manner rather than focusing on what not to do. When you have agreed your school's norms, they can be embedded into school-wide systems for recognition and reward.⁶³



Developing a language for the school community through character dispositions

St. John XXIII Primary School, Thomastown East



Staff at St. John XXIII Primary School saw an opportunity to be more proactive in their approach to SEL learning. Alongside professional learning, mentoring and action research, the school set out to create a common language that could be used by teachers, students and families.

Five school dispositions and subsequent cartoon characters were developed drawing on a range of learner attributes which the school values: Responsible Rob, Reflective Raj, Collaborative Cate, Inquisitive Izzy, Risk-taking Rex and Resilient Rose. These learner attributes personify SEL skills along with broader characteristics of wellbeing and visible learner traits.

At the beginning of each school year, these are explicitly taught, and students co-construct 'I can...' statements as a class to apply their understanding. For example, year 5 & 6 students considering what Reflective Raj might say, 'I can... work to understand my strengths'.

Students are coached to become 'disposition detectives', on the lookout for when their peers demonstrate the traits of a character. Disposition detectives are required to provide specific feedback to explain their reasoning for nominating a peer. Nominations add to acknowledgements from teachers – with students earning 'Be the best me' awards at class and school-wide events in recognition of them demonstrating the capabilities.

The common language used across the school has been essential in building and sustaining whole school expectations. Staff and students understand that these expectations are entirely portable – the skills that are developed in the classroom are just as important at break times, at home or in the community.

Box 10: School councils

Recommendation 1 provided the example of 'class rules'—with evidence that rules are more likely to be followed when students have been involved in developing them. Similarly, at a whole-school level, authentically engaging students in 'school councils' or 'action groups' with representatives from each class could be an effective way of creating shared values across the school, and identifying and addressing issues that affect socio-emotional development.

There has been little evaluation of school councils in primary schools to date. However, in a recent randomised trial of one SEL program in 40 English secondary schools, a school 'action group' (comprising of at least six students and six staff, meeting twice per term) was used to review and revise school-wide policies that could improve the school environment.

Together with staff training in restorative practices and a SEL curriculum, this program of support was found to lead to reductions in bullying, and increases in student wellbeing.⁶⁴



SEL routines

School routines are important opportunities to introduce and reinforce SEL skills taught in the classroom. Here are examples of whole-school routines commonly used across evidence-based SEL programs:

- Regular school assemblies are devoted to student's social and emotional development, encouraging the use of particular skills or strategies for the week ahead. There might, for example, be a focus on helping others or respecting differences. Schools may use whole-school activities to recognise or reward students who have demonstrated SEL skills;
- Classes use circle time at the start or end of the day as an opportunity to share news and warm up for the day ahead or reflect on the day. This helps to build a sense of community and practise social and emotional skills; and
- There are school-wide systems for noticing and reinforcing examples of SEL skills being put into practice, for example, using points, peer nominations, praise postcards, or certificates sent home.

Changes to the school environment

The school's physical environment can help students apply their social and emotional learning through, for example:

- Providing 'worry boxes' in which students can post any worries they may have, and ask for help from an adult; and
- Providing areas in the playground where students can go to calm down, or spaces where they can use the problem-solving process to resolve conflicts, with support from an adult or trained peer mediators.

Check behaviour and anti-bullying policies are aligned with your approach to SEL

When thinking about whole school strategies, it is important to reflect on how your school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies align with your other work on SEL. Behaviour policies which are supportive and reinforce SEL development lead to better behavioural outcomes, positive student teacher-relationships and a more positive school climate.^{15,65} In contrast to this, there is some evidence that harsh, punitive, and exclusionary approaches to behaviour problems can have a negative impact on students social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes.^{66,67}

Aligning behaviour policies with SEL development could include:⁶⁸ helping students understand the impact of their behaviour, developing shared rules based on mutual respect, or deciding among staff that you are a 'no shouting school'. Anti-bullying policies can also be aligned with SEL through sessions focused on empathy and perspective-taking, or considering the role of bystanders when bullying takes place (see [Box 11](#)).

The EEF's Guidance Report [Improving behaviour in schools](#) provides more information that can support schools' planning for SEL.



BOX 11: The role of bystanders in reducing bullying

KiVa is a whole-school approach aimed at reducing bullying, first developed in Finland (where it is used by 90% of schools) and now used in several other countries. It places particular emphasis on the role of the bystander in intervening when bullying takes place.

Classroom lessons aim to:

1. raise awareness among students of the role that the group plays in bullying;
2. increase empathy towards victims of bullying; and
3. promote student's skills in supporting victims.

Lessons follow the SAFE practices (set out in [Recommendation 4](#)) and are reinforced through the school environment (assemblies, posters and so on), and information to families. KiVa has had positive results in several trials internationally.^{69,70}

Engagement with families and community

The family is the first place of learning for SEL skills, guided by what families and communities consider important. Schools build on this and provide opportunities to influence skill development. An important part of whole school strategies is therefore the school's engagement with families to ensure that social and emotional skills transfer between the home and school environments.

Strategies used to engage parents could include:

- the involvement of parents in the drafting of school norms, vision and behaviour policy;
- information sent to parents about the strategies used to support skill development, including information about ways to practise SEL skills at home'
- sending positive messages home to families about student's social and emotional development (for example, sending postcards home that praise the child for using specific social and emotional skills)
- inviting parents to participate in SEL learning opportunities, workshops, family events, and so on; and
- using parent-teacher meetings, student-led conferences and end of term reports as an opportunity to discuss student's social and emotional development in addition to their academic development.

For more information on strategies for working with families, see Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report [*Working with parents to support children's learning*](#).



Thinking carefully about implementation is especially important in relation to SEL due to the wide variation in program outcomes and the potential complexity of whole-school change. High-quality implementation is positively associated with better outcomes for students.²⁵ Moreover, uncoordinated approaches to SEL programming have been shown to have negative effects on staff morale and student engagement, and are therefore ineffective.⁷¹ Insufficient time for teachers to plan and deliver SEL lessons, and lack of training or buy-in from staff, are particular challenges to address.

Establish a shared vision for SEL

The leadership team shapes the core values, attitudes, beliefs and culture of the school and classrooms, and therefore influences the extent to which schools see social and emotional learning as a priority and make time for it. Where school leaders are perceived to be supportive of SEL initiatives, teachers feel better equipped to deliver it in class and view skills as more likely to become embedded across the school.³⁹

The first priority for leaders is to develop or refine a shared SEL vision for the school that helps to foster commitment and ownership among all stakeholders (staff, students, parents). It takes into account the school's unique strengths and shares the hopes and expectations of the entire school community.

In order to support SEL, leaders should:

- establish a team that shares leadership responsibility for SEL;
- work with the team to build or refine a school vision that includes developing and supporting SEL, for both students and staff;
- review school policies so that they are compatible with the school's SEL vision;
- review the curriculum to build in opportunities for SEL learning across a range of subjects;
- create time and space for all staff to engage in SEL planning and implementation (for example, as part of inset training, or in place of activities that may be time-consuming but having limited impact);
- structure the school environment so that it supports SEL development;
- involve families and the community in what the students are learning in SEL; and
- model the behaviours they wish to see adopted in others.

Ultimately, it is key that SEL is integrated with the whole school system, so it is 'connected to—rather than competing with—other school priorities'.⁷² As noted in the introduction, there is good evidence that when well-implemented, SEL has a positive impact on academic attainment so these aims should not be in tension.

Treat implementation as a process, not an event

Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report, *Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation*, can support schools to think through the process of managing change around SEL. Figure 4, in the *Acting on the evidence* section of this Guidance Report describes the stages of successful implementation.



Involve all school staff in planning for SEL

Though leadership is crucial, if teachers and others school staff are not consulted about their views on SEL, efforts to integrate it are much less likely to be effective. A survey of teachers found that:

- partnership between teachers and senior leadership in introducing SEL is associated with a higher likelihood that teachers are satisfied with the SEL provision; and that
- SEL is more likely to be considered across many different subject areas when teachers are involved in introducing it.¹⁶

It is also important to consult with school staff because there are likely to be mixed views about if and how SEL can be introduced. For example, most teachers say that they see SEL as important, but not all believe that socio-emotional skills are teachable, or that it is the core focus of their role.¹⁶ Teachers also have mixed views about the extent to which SEL should be given dedicated time as opposed to being integrated into a range of other subjects. Discussing these views openly is likely to increase the chances that all school staff support efforts for embedding SEL—the evidence provided elsewhere in this report should be helpful for informing these conversations.

Focus on implementation quality

How SEL approaches are implemented really matters. The extent to which teachers and other school staff value SEL, are given time and support to prepare, and are engaging in their delivery of activities influences outcomes.²⁵ Research on over 200 school-based SEL programs showed that higher quality implementation was associated with improvements in academic performance, as well as reductions in conduct problems and in emotional distress (when compared to students who received poorly implemented programs).²⁵ In this study, ‘high quality implementation’ was characterised by higher intensity, consistency, clarity and program fidelity, and this was associated with larger impacts than loose guidelines and broad-based principles.²⁵

As noted in [Recommendation 3](#), staff preparedness and enthusiasm for delivering SEL has been associated with improved impacts in two recent UK evaluations,^{54,55} and appears to be more important than simply delivering more SEL lesson content. Quality delivery is likely to be supported by the school being clear about the outcomes it is trying to achieve, ensuring genuine buy-in from teachers, alongside appropriate professional learning opportunities and building in reviews of progress.

Class teachers can deliver SEL effectively

In most cases, schools do not need external or specialist staff to deliver SEL activities to students. In fact, effects on academic performance are generally larger when teachers—as opposed to external practitioners, researchers or community members—implement SEL programs.²⁵ This may be because there is more opportunity for practice to become embedded over time. A partial exception to this may be more targeted forms of support, where specialist input is likely to be more beneficial.^{55,73}



Provide training and support to school staff

Students are more likely to benefit from SEL when staff receive training and the program or practice is implemented well and embedded into everyday teaching and learning.⁷⁴ Teachers, however, often receive little or no training in how to promote these skills and report limited confidence in their ability to respond to students' emotional, social and behavioural needs.^{75,76}

Teachers who have received training related to SEL are more likely to agree that SEL has improved their relationship with their students, more likely to agree that emotion is fundamental to learning, and are more likely to agree that their students had consistent behavioural goals between school and home.¹⁶

Professional development on SEL should broadly focus on meeting three key goals:

1. Readiness for change. This involves ensuring that school staff recognise and agree with the perceived needs for the approach, and understanding the procedures and process for achieving the goal.^{77,78}
2. Specific skills-based training in relation to a teacher's sense of self-efficacy in implementing SEL. Self-efficacy is underpinned by knowledge, understanding and perceived competence.
3. Embedding practices and ensuring quality and fidelity^{53,79} involves providing ongoing support to check that a program or approach is being delivered as intended, and that staff have the time and support required. This may involve bringing groups of staff together periodically to trouble-shoot issues that arise.

It is important that professional development extends beyond classroom teachers. Staff members other than teachers receive even less training and support despite the fact that teaching assistants, sports coaches, and other non-teaching staff are with students during many of the interactions that may particularly demand effective SEL strategies and skills.⁸⁰ Schools may wish to review Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report [Making best use of Teaching Assistants](#) for more information.

Monitor implementation and evaluate the impact of SEL

The call to 'monitor and evaluate' can feel like generic advice, and one that risks creating additional workload. However, it is likely to be especially important in relation to SEL, for several reasons relating to recommendations in this report:

- Flexible strategies drawn from evidence-based programs are a promising approach and there is growing research promoting such practices as a complement to programs. But they have not been formally tested; so schools need to judge which strategies work in their contexts.
- The impact of SEL programs varies substantially. Even those with good evidence of impact cannot guarantee the same results in new contexts, and the effort to introduce, tailor or maintain a program is likely to be substantial. Therefore, checking it is meeting its goals is essential.
- Whole-school change is known to be more challenging to achieve than introducing a classroom curriculum, and requires careful coordination and oversight from the leadership team.
- Given the perceived implementation challenges related to SEL in general (lack of time; lack of training; competing priorities), assessing progress is needed to check barriers are being addressed, and to provide reassurance that efforts are meeting their aims (and to learn and change approach if they are not).



Schools should ensure that their monitoring and evaluation is proportionate to the scale of their needs and efforts (and doesn't become a further barrier). As a starting point, regular, low-intensity and efficient auditing is likely to be helpful—focused on indicators that are proxies for SEL development, such as student behaviour or well being, or teacher perceptions. Collecting regular feedback through surveys or focus groups of students and staff on issues like class or school climate is relatively straight-forward, could help to identify ongoing issues, and should also promote a positive culture in which the school listens to and responds to needs. This is likely to provide valuable information for:

- identifying needs;
- focusing efforts; and
- checking whether approaches are having an impact.

To extend these efforts schools should also consider assessing student's SEL development using validated measurement tools. Care needs to be taken in the interpretation of the results and actions that follow. The [EEF's SPECTRUM database](#) may support schools to identify possible measures. This provides an overview of measures, and the accompanying report provides guidance on selecting measures.

Monitoring to determine next steps for SEL

Clairvaux Catholic School, Belmont



Clairvaux Catholic School developed a strategic plan for wellbeing in 2016 – which begun with a vision built on a core question 'what do we want our school to look like?' Two years later, staff initiated an audit to understand how they had been performing aligned to the strategic plan which highlighted a gap around monitoring and the collection of data.

The internal audit was conducted primarily by members of the leadership team to ensure minimal interruption for other staff. Student perception data was collected through surveying – looking broadly at wellbeing, with specific indicators used for SEL skills. Parents and staff were surveyed to provide a holistic picture on how the entire community were experiencing wellbeing, including SEL, at the school.

The leadership team engaged with student council to analyse the survey outputs, building agency while providing additional detail around the student experience.

Through the audit process, the school has refined the strategic plan with a focus on the explicit teaching of SEL skills, drawing on the resources and theories from a variety of sources to best meet the needs of all students. This explicit teaching is accompanied by relevant professional development, and by a range of whole-school initiatives that occur for the school community outside of dedicated teaching and learning time.

Acting on the evidence

These recommendations do not provide a 'one size fits all' solution. It is important to consider the delicate balance between implementing the recommendations faithfully and applying them appropriately to your school's particular context. Implementing the recommendations effectively will require careful consideration of how they fit your school's context and the application of sound professional judgement.

Inevitably, change takes time, and we recommend taking at least two terms to plan, develop, and pilot strategies on a small scale before rolling out new practices across the school. Gather support for change across the school and set aside regular time throughout the year to focus on this project and review progress.

Evidence for Learning has produced '[Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#)', a Guidance Report to assist schools as they approach any change within the school.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the implementation process which schools can apply to any implementation challenge.



The stages of implementation

Foundations for good implementation

- ✓ Treat implementation as a process, not an event. Plan and execute it in stages.
- ✓ Create a leadership environment and school climate that is conducive to good implementation.

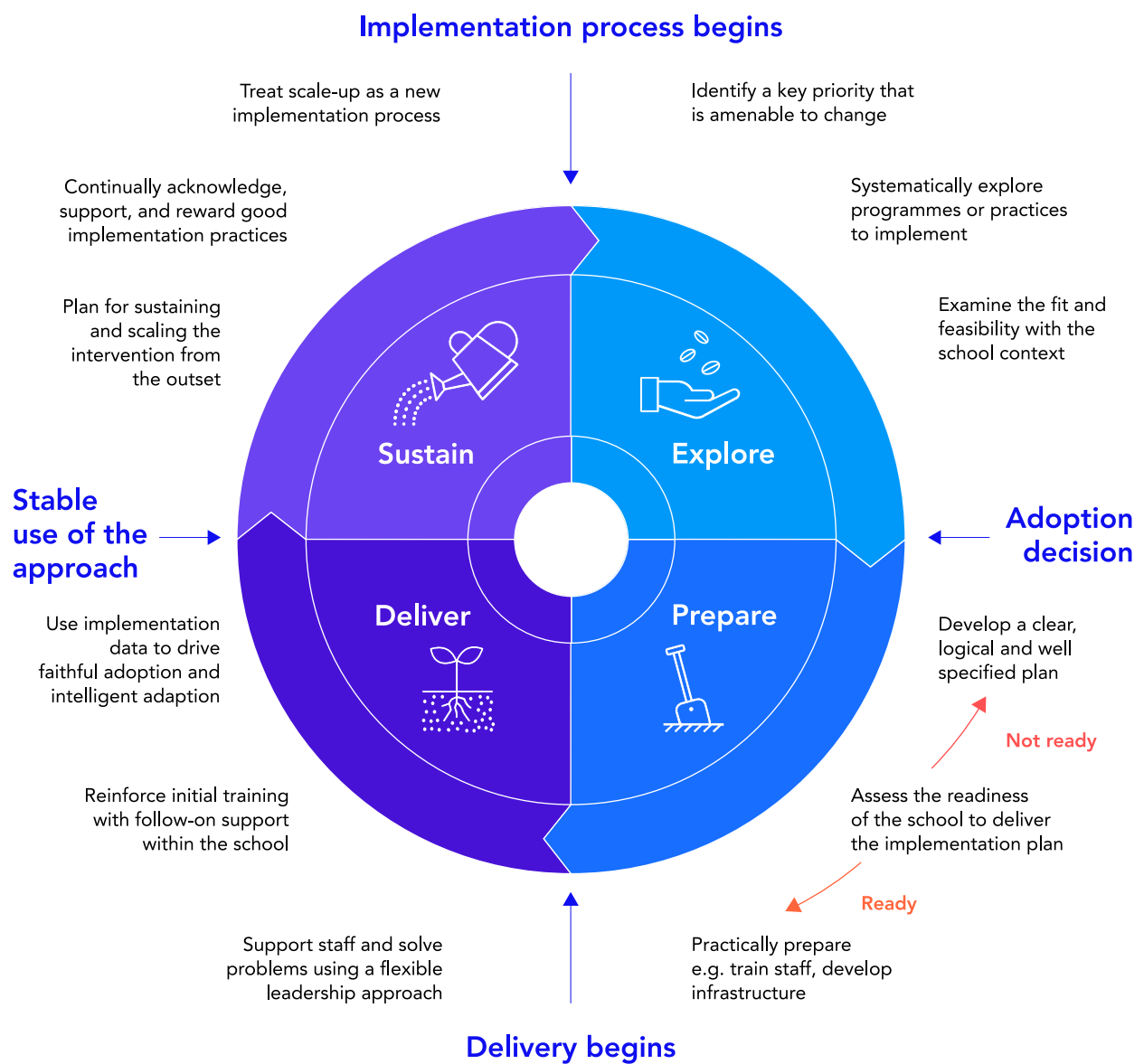


Figure 4: Cycle of implementing change

We have provided these questions to prompt reflection, aligned to The Stages of Implementation, detailed on the previous page. These stages are explored further in [Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#). There may be additional questions that will guide your school, depending on the approach that you are looking to implement. [Table 2](#) also includes considerations aligned to the explore and prepare stages of implementation.



Foundations for good implementation

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have the school leadership team created a clear vision and understanding of the expectation of social and emotional learning?
- ✓ Is there a team responsible for managing the implementation or a program or approach?



Explore

Checklist questions

- ✓ Do you already have an understanding of how SEL is being delivered at your school? Has an audit been conducted?
- ✓ Have you assessed the needs of your students in relation to the SEL skills that they currently have and those that they require?
- ✓ Have you explored the evidence available on approaches and considered if it is feasible to deliver in your context?
- ✓ Do staff understand the need to adopt a new approach to SEL? (acceptability)



Prepare

Checklist questions

- ✓ Does the school leadership have a logical plan for implementing the new approach?
- ✓ Are you able to capture the changes in practice that you want to see?
- ✓ Are staff ready to take on new approaches? (acceptability)
- ✓ Have you considered the time that is required for the new approach in an ongoing way?



Deliver

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have teachers been involved in professional learning up front with access to ongoing support?
- ✓ Does the professional learning show teachers that development of SEL skills should not be an extra task that adds to their workload but an effective way to build relationships and improve student outcomes?
- ✓ Are the changes being rolled out gradually, if appropriate, beginning with an initial team to test the new practices at a small scale?
- ✓ Have you used the data collected to evaluate and adapt the practices?



Sustain

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have you achieved the desired outcomes?
- ✓ Do you have an ongoing plan for monitoring and evaluating your approach to SEL?
- ✓ Do you have a plan to support the scale up or sustainability of your approach to SEL?

Further reading

Evidence for Learning has recently commissioned and published a systematic review on the state of the evidence of wellbeing interventions to explore the impact on academic achievement and related health and wellbeing measures for all students. The systematic review included a number of interventions with a focus on the SEL and highlighted evidence that is relevant for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The review was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in partnership with VicHealth.

evidenceforlearning.org.au/assets/references/Main-Report-Student-Health-and-Wellbeing-Systematic-Review.pdf

The **Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA)** website contains resources for school leaders and teachers that will assist in the implementation of the recommendations outlined in the Guidance Report.

Australian Curriculum General Capability:
Personal and Social Capability

australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/

A number of the General Capabilities are relevant to SEL learning including Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding and Critical and Creative Thinking.

australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/

The **Be You** Program Directory contains details of Australian wellbeing programs, including those which address SEL, with a rating around the strength of evidence and implementation. Leaders and teachers are encouraged to consider the evidence and implementation ratings alongside their school context when looking to adopt one of these approaches.

beyou.edu.au/resources/programs-directory

The **Victorian Department of Education and Training** houses the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) learning materials which have been designed for teachers in primary and secondary schools to develop students' social, emotional and positive relationship skills. The resources are mapped to the levels and capabilities of the Australian Curriculum.

fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/ByPin?pin=2JZX4R

The **Early Intervention Foundation** (UK) Guidebook provides information about early intervention programs that have been evaluated and shown to improve outcomes for children and young people. School leaders should note that this is a UK resource and so many of the programs may not be readily available in Australia.

guidebook.eif.org.uk/

The **Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning** (CASEL) website (US) provides a wealth of resources designed to support and prioritise SEL in schools.

casel.org/

How was this guide complied?

This Guidance Report draws on the best available evidence regarding social and emotional learning in primary schools. It is based on an [evidence review](#) conducted by Dr Michael Wigelsworth, Lily Verity, Carla Mason, Professor Neil Humphrey, and Professor Pamela Qualter (University of Manchester).

The Guidance Report was created over four stages:

- 1. Scoping.** The EEF and EIF consulted with a number of teachers and academics about the scope of the report. We then appointed an advisory panel and the review team, and agreed research questions for the review.
- 2. Evidence review.** The review team conducted searches for the best available international evidence using a range of databases, including new analysis on the common elements of effective programs.
- 3. Research on current practice.** The review team also conducted a survey of 436 primary schools in England to understand what schools are currently doing in relation to social and emotional learning.
- 4. Writing recommendations.** The EEF and EIF worked with the advisory panel and reviewers to draft the Guidance Report and recommendations. The Guidance Report was written by Matthew van Poortvliet (EEF), Dr Aleisha Clarke (EIF), and Jean Gross CBE (SEAL Community) with input and feedback from many others.
- 5. Adapting for Australian educators.** E4L have contextualised the Guidance Report, consulting with schools and academics to ensure the concepts are relevant and build on resources available to Australian schools. Additional illustrations are included to demonstrate how recommendations or strategies are being implemented in schools.

The advisory panel included Jonathan Baggaley (PSHE Association), Professor Robin Banerjee (University of Sussex), Professor Margaret Barry (National University of Ireland Galway), Dr Vashti Berry (University of Exeter), Jean Gross CBE (SEAL Community), Emma Lewis (Heathmere Primary School), and Liz Robinson (Big Education).

We would like to thank the researchers and practitioners who were involved in providing support and feedback on drafts of this guidance in both the UK and in Australia.

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