

**A TOOLKIT FOR COACHES OF MIDDLE, HIGH
SCHOOL, AND COLLEGIATE ATHLETES**



CHILDREN'S INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) PRACTICES TO ENHANCE ATHLETE PERFORMANCE



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome Coaches!

Thank you for downloading our 7-week Social Emotional Learning (SEL) for Sport Coaches Toolkit. The purpose of this 7-week toolkit is for coaches to be able to implement core social and emotional learning (SEL) practices during their practice sessions with their athletes in order to enhance athlete performance and give athletes a more rewarding athletic experience. The 7 topics that are discussed in detail align with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) core competencies for social emotional learning. They are, 1) strengthening relationships, 2) self-awareness, 3) goal-setting, 4) self-management, 5) asking for help, 6) connecting with community, and 7) reflection. Click [here](#) for more information about the CASEL core competencies for social emotional learning.

The accompanying document provides an outline for introducing 7 key topics with your athletes. For each topic, there is an introduction as well as a team meeting conversation starter and activities for your athletes to complete to further support their understanding of the topics and how they can strengthen engagement with their sport. The topics that you introduce will help you as a coach develop a stronger sense of culture and camaraderie among your athletes.

The toolkit is best suited for coaches of competitive athletes in middle and high school as well as collegiate settings. However, all of the activities can be adapted for use with club teams, recreational leagues, and afterschool programs.



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Think of the activities in this guide as a starting point. They are simply meant to provide an outline that can be implemented during the offseason, preseason, in-season, or post-season. You can follow the 7-week plan in the order presented or you can introduce the topics as you wish based on the needs of your athletes. For example, you may feel as a coach that your athletes would benefit from having a stronger sense of self, so could start with that topic. Other coaches may prefer to begin with reflection and goal-setting. Your approach to the toolkit may vary based on the sport you are coaching and the age range of your athletes.

Each topic comes with a written overview, a team conversation starter, and a task for the week. You may choose to address one topic per week, covering the prompts and activities during practice sessions. Or you may decide to spread a topic out over several weeks, allowing your athletes time to practice the skills and engage in additional conversation. For the conversation starters, you might open it up for large group discussion or break athletes into smaller groups. You might also use journaling or writing at the beginning to get athletes comfortable with reflecting in this way. As your team members get more comfortable, you could ask them to lead the conversation each week on a rotating basis. Younger athletes may need more guidance and support through the activities while older athletes can probably implement activities more independently.

Listen to your athletes and follow their lead for what is going to be most effective. Athletes need to strike a healthy balance between being prepared on the field of competition and within the field in their minds. The activities and pauses for reflection within this guide will give your athletes an opportunity to pause and look within themselves to see if their actions align with their goals. In many ways, it is more about the journey than it is about the outcome.



STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

WEEK 1

Parents, friends, romantic partners, teachers, coaches, colleagues, faith leaders, acquaintances—we all have a variety of different relationships in our lives. Figuring out how to start, maintain, and grow positive relationships is a key aspect of leading a happy and fulfilled life. People need positive relationships and it can take skills such as communication, cultural humility, patience, and effective teamwork to maintain them. Just as important is figuring out how to set boundaries and navigate conflict in relationships that aren't so positive.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: Give athletes the following prompt: Think of one individual you have a positive relationship with? How did that relationship start, and what keeps it alive? What makes it positive?

Task for the Week: Positive relationships are an important part of being on a team. Let your athletes know that this week you will be focusing on really getting to know one another better. Randomly assign each player another person on the team. Each player will be responsible for interviewing their assigned person and then presenting information about that person to the team. You can give them time during practice for the interviews or have them do it independently and then present at your next practice. Encourage athletes to generate their own interview questions or use the *Interview Questions* contained in the supplemental activities.

Bonus Activity: Invite your athletes to identify one important relationship in their life and thank that person for their support sometime during the week. Thanking them in person is ideal, but they could also email, text, video message, or post to social media. Remind athletes to use the person's name, be specific in why they appreciate them, and say the words "thank you!" You might want to follow up with athletes on what it felt like to show gratitude toward someone.



SELF-AWARENESS

WEEK 2

Self-awareness is foundational to a person's social emotional development. It allows us to identify our strengths and weaknesses, think about what we need and what we have to give, and develop the mindful awareness of what our bodies and minds are doing in times of heightened emotion. Paying attention to yourself is not selfish, it is an important step in figuring out who you are and what you want your place in the world to be.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: Ask athletes to reflect on and discuss the following: What drew you to the sport or activity that you are gathered together to practice? Why is being a member of this team important to you? Have those interests/traits/experiences ever drawn you to anything else in life? You may choose to use the *Your Why (Purpose)* activity in the supplemental activities to extend this conversation starter.

Task for the Week: Have athletes partner up, either with a teammate or another peer, and work through the conversation starter prompts below. You might choose to write or type the questions on cards in advance so the groups have them handy. If one of your athletes prefers not to partner up, allow him or her to tackle the questions through journaling. Encourage athletes to be honest with themselves and with their partner.

- When do you typically feel your best? Is feeling good something you notice? List an example (or examples) of what feeling your best looks like—what was the situation, what were you doing, how did it impact the people around you?
- What makes you feel not so great? Do you have things you like to do to put yourself in a better mood?
- What would you say is your “default” emotion? On a typical day, how do you feel?
- Is there anything in life you want to improve (a skill, achieving a goal, improving a relationship, in your learning)? What are some steps you can take in order to improve on some aspect of your life?
- What are the areas in your life that you feel good about (existing skills, achievements, relationships, or abilities)?



GOAL SETTING

WEEK 3

Setting goals is an important part of self-management and responsible decision-making – two core social and emotional competencies. Embarking on the beginning of a new season is when coaches and athletes begin to map out yearly goals. Each athlete's goals will vary depending on the sport. Regardless of what we hope and aspire to achieve during the upcoming season, any goal without a plan is just a wish for something we want to happen. To achieve our goals, it is important for us to think about what it takes and what we are willing to do to meet them.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: Begin a conversation by discussing outcomes/ goals for the upcoming season, part of the school year, etc. Ask your athletes:

- What goals do you hope the team can accomplish?
- What is a goal you want to accomplish for yourself?

Encourage your athletes to break their team and individual goals down into outcome vs. process goals. ask athletes to consider why they might be choosing goals that are extrinsic or don't have a specific deadline. For example, you could tell athletes that wanting to earn a sports scholarship is fantastic, but push them to consider what actionable steps they will need to accomplish to earn that scholarship and what they will need to do this season to move toward that goal. Ask - Do you need to hit certain strength benchmarks in the weight room; do you need to achieve and maintain a certain GPA; will you need a recommendation from your coaches and teachers?

See the *Goal Setting* activity in the supplemental activities for definitions of each type of goal and a handout athletes can use to record their goals and commitments toward achieving them.

WEEK 3 - GOAL SETTING (CONTINUED)

Task for the Week: Ask your athletes to think about what they want to accomplish throughout the course of this season—what are one or two objectives they want to be able to achieve? Have athletes answer the following questions to better give themselves an opportunity to achieve their goals.

- What is the top goal or goals you want to achieve this year? Why is achieving these goals important to you?
- What new skills might you need to learn in order to achieve your goals?
- What sacrifices will you need to make in order to achieve these goals?
- Who might you need to collaborate/work with in order to achieve your goals?
- What obstacles will you need to overcome in order to achieve your desired goal(s)?

Bonus Activity: Gratitude and Goals Journal - Talk to your athletes about the importance of accountability and positive thinking when it comes to achieving your goals. Challenge your athletes to keep a daily gratitude and goals journal for 30 consecutive days. On the first page, encourage them to write down the goals that Give them the following three prompts for each day:

- a) What are three things you are grateful for today?
- b) What are two wins for the day in any area of your life?
- c) What is one thing you need/should focus on to help you achieve your goal(s)?

At the end of the 30 days, invite discussion about how it went, what they experienced or noticed, and if it made a difference in their sense of wellbeing and success.



SELF-MANAGEMENT

WEEK 4

Once we have developed relationships, explored our self-awareness, and set goals, we're able to start to figure out how to manage the things we might be experiencing. Self-management could include coping mechanisms for when we are stressed, overwhelmed, or frustrated. It could also include systems or habits we develop in order to work toward goals. Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation as well as setting personal and collective goals are key social emotional skills that help athletes succeed.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: "Control the Controllable" activity - On chart paper, a notebook, or a whiteboard create headers for two lists. Invite athletes to consider what things/facets of our lives we have control over? Next, ask them to consider what we are not able to control? Compare the lists that are created. Discuss how we can put more energy into the things we are able to control.

Task for the Week: Together with your athletes, brainstorm a list of possible ways to reduce stress. Encourage them to think about stress in school, at home or in their personal lives, and in their athletic performance. You may need to help athletes generate a wide range of examples (e.g., meditation, listen to music, ride a bike, go for a walk, get together with a friend, dance, draw or color, etc.). Be sure to share your own strategies and make sure there is open space for all kinds of activities. Next, invite athletes to make a list of three things they want to try when they are feeling stressed. Ask them to practice those strategies during the week. If time allows, at the end of the week or in a future week, have them share strategies with each other and talk about how it went when they implemented them during times of stress.



ASKING FOR HELP

WEEK 5

It's very easy to get caught up in the mindset that we need to do everything ourselves, and that individualism is the most important quality we can foster. The truth is that we are stronger when we support each other and asking for help when you need it is a strength that will serve you throughout your life. It is also a critical part of being a member of an athletic team.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: Start by asking your athletes – Is there a time when you wanted to ask for help, or felt like you needed help, but didn't receive it? Has there ever been a time when you asked for help and had a good outcome? Next invite your athletes to brainstorm some ways to ask for help and encourage young people to generate as many phrases as they can think of (e.g., Do you have time for a question? Is there a way I could do this differently? I could use some guidance, etc.).

Younger students may need concrete examples to get them started. You might share some examples from your own life when you needed help (e.g., deciding whether or where to go to college, guidance on a career decision, getting help finding an item in a store, asking for help with a home project), and how you handled it. Make sure to include big and small issues, such as asking for help with chores at home, getting help figuring out what to do when a friend is struggling, or help with mistakes on a test.

Task for the Week: Invite athletes to reflect either with each other or in a journal on the following:

- Think about something that you have struggled with recently—identify why you struggled with that facet of your life. What made it difficult?
- Were you missing some piece of information that would have made finishing a task more manageable?
- Do you have someone in your life that you could have reached out to and asked for help? If yes, why didn't you reach out? What made asking for help difficult for you? How did that make you feel? Are there ways you could reach out for help next time?



CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY

WEEK 6

All of us exist within a broader community. Understanding how we function within our community is an important part of understanding ourselves. Connecting with one's community is a key part of social awareness. When we can begin to show concern for and understand the feelings and experiences of others and recognize all of the resources and supports available within a community group, we are more effective in our own lives.

Team Meeting Conversation Starter: On chart paper or a whiteboard, ask athletes to brainstorm all the different people that make up their school community. Have them name as many different groups, roles, and individuals as they can (for individuals, think more of categories like "principal, security officer, front desk admin," and less of naming every single student or teacher.) The goal is to identify as many diverse stakeholders as possible. Then ask athletes to think about what each role/person does to grow or sustain the school community. Discuss why each role is important.

Task for the Week: Invite athletes to work with a partner or reflect in a journal on the following prompt: What is one community you are part of outside of school? It could be an interest group, your neighborhood, etc. Think through the same questions answered for the team conversation starter. Make sure athletes consider their own role in that community.

WEEK 6 - CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY (CONTINUED)

Bonus Activity: Helping others and contributing to one's community has immense social and emotional benefits. It can build a sense of belonging and purpose as well as improve overall well-being. Consider pursuing a service project this week or month as a team or encourage your athletes to engage in service on their own. Make sure you frame service learning as an important part of being a good community member - that is, being an active member of your community means contributing in some way. Be sure your athletes do not see the service project as "charity."

Service-learning is most effective when it is grounded in one's own community - for example doing something to help or improve the school, cleaning up a neighborhood park, painting park benches, planting flowers near a basketball court that team members use regularly, etc.

Before the project, ask athletes to think about why it is important to contribute to your community and what the community gives back to them.

After the project, take some time to talk with athletes (or encourage them to write in a journal) about what they experienced, how their service improved their community, and what else they can do to be a contributing member of their community.



REFLECTION

WEEK 7

Reflection is key to personal growth. There are always opportunities to reflect, think about experiences, and learn from the past in order to create the future we want. Reflection can help individuals to identify personal strengths, develop a sense of personal and social identity, make responsible decisions, and create a sense of purpose, all of which are essential for athletic performance.

Team Conversation Starter: Let your athletes know why reflection is important. Share that they are going to practice being reflective by focusing on their use of time. For one week, ask your athletes to complete the *Day-in-the-Life* activity sheet contained in the supplemental activities section. You may want to give them 7 copies so they have it handy. Tell them:

- As you proceed/move through your day, fill in what you do during each hour.
- In the time that you are not in school, what types of activities are you participating in?

At the end of the week, have them reflect individually, with a partner, or in the larger group. Ask them to consider: Are your activities helping you move closer towards your goals? If not, what might be the cause of filling the time with less purposeful activities. Encourage athletes to be mindful and reflective on the time they have.

See the *How Much Do You Get Out of an Hour* activity in the supplemental activities section for additional prompts and discussion points.

WEEK 7 - REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

Task for the Week: Invite your athletes to think about their experiences over the past eight weeks. You have collectively explored strengthening relationships, self-awareness, goal setting, self-management, asking for help, connecting with community, and now reflection.

- Ask athletes to identify one thing they have learned or changed in their lives based on the past 7 weeks.
- Ask them to then think about one area in which they want to do more work, and set an actionable and achievable goal to achieve progress.

Have athletes share out their two things for the group and invite the team to offer thoughts and feedback.



SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES

Interview Questions - (Week 1)

- Who is your favorite movie character?
- What do you love about our sport? How old were you when you started playing?
- Name two professional athletes you admire.
- If you could choose only one food to eat for the rest of your life, what would it be?
- Do you have siblings? How old are they? Do you enjoy spending time together? What annoys you about them?
- Do you have any pets? What kind?
- What other activities do you do outside of school?
- In your opinion, what is the best way to spend a Saturday?

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Your Why (Purpose) Activity - (Week 2)

You were made to strive to be your best, therefore, settling for anything less than your best is a misuse of the gifts and talent you have been given. Most athletes say they want to be great; they want to be the best. However, sometimes, their actions don't match their words. To be your best requires that your physical actions are in alignment with your mental desire to achieve your *telescope goal(s)* for the season. For some athletes, the ultimate goal may be to win a national or conference championship. For others, the goal may be to hit a personal best throw or meet a specific race time. A telescope goal helps us view our long-term goals. It assists in guiding us towards what we want to accomplish. It "peers" into the future, allowing us to see where we ultimately want to go. It unlocks a picture of where we see ourselves going in the next year, two years, or four years.

And an important part of achieving those goals, it to have the self-awareness to know WHY you want it. Purpose and power flow from your WHY and they inspire you to work with more passion and positive energy. When you know what you want and WHY you want it, you are driven by a passion for taking the necessary steps to make it happen.

Ask athletes to consider the following prompts to help them determine their WHY:

- Why have you decided to join this sport?
- Why do you want to be successful at it?
- Why do you want to achieve the goals you have set out for yourself?
- How does your telescope vision align with your commitments?

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Goal Setting Activity - (Week 3)

Embarking on the beginning of a new season is when coaches and athletes begin to map out yearly goals. Your goals may vary between the indoor and outdoor seasons. For some athletes, the ultimate goal may be to win a national or conference championship. Whereas for others, the goal may be to hit a personal best throw. There are two types of goals that our athletes may embark upon during their upcoming season or multiple seasons.

The first type of goal they may decide to pursue is an outcome goal. An outcome goal is fixed, concrete, and has a number or specific result attached to it. For example, you may have a goal of throwing the shot-put 50' or hitting 75% of your free throws, or getting a certain batting average during the course of the season. Those outcomes are fixed. Either you achieve the results or you don't. It doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room, especially if the only outcome you are interested in achieving a specific number or percent. For example, if you don't meet your free throw percent, will you look upon your season as being successful or not? If you don't believe that is a successful season, why do you believe that to be so?

A second type of goal that your athlete may decide to pursue is called a process goal. A process goal is more focused on what you need to do in order to achieve your outcome goal. Process goals are 100% in your control. An example of a process goal might be to go to the weight room 4 times a week during the offseason and 3 times per week during the season to maintain your conditioning. Another example may be to spend 30 minutes on your mobility after a training session or to take an ice bath after training sessions each week. Focusing on process goals will help reduce your stress and anxiety during the course of a season because they are outcomes and results that are directly in your control. If you skip two training sessions during the week because you simply don't want to lift, you have nobody to blame but yourself. Working on what we have control over, in the long run, will better give you as a thrower an opportunity to be successful in accomplishing your goals.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Goal Setting Activity (continued - week 3)

Regardless of what we hope and aspire for during the season, any goal without a plan is just a hope. To achieve our goals, it is important for us to think about what we are willing to do to meet them.

Ask Your Athletes: Before you establish your goal(s), it is equally important to decide what commitments you need to make to achieve your goal(s) for the season. Decide what you truly want to accomplish this season. What do you aspire and hope for? How much are you willing to sacrifice to achieve your goals? Are you willing to sacrifice time with your friends? Are you willing to sacrifice time attending social gatherings?

Instruct athletes to write their goals and commitments on the sheet below, in a journal, or on their computer/phone, and be as specific as possible. After they have written down their goals for the season, ask them to think about why that outcome is important to them. Why is it important to accomplish your specific goal(s) this season?

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Goal Setting Activity (continued - week 3)

GOAL	Commitment

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

A Day in the Life Activity - (Week 7)

What does a day in your life look like? In the space below, write out your current daily schedule.

<u><i>Time</i></u>	<u><i>Activity</i></u>
6am-7am	_____
7am-8am	_____
8am-9am	_____
9am-10am	_____
10am-11am	_____
11am-12pm	_____
12pm-1pm	_____
1pm-2pm	_____
2pm-3pm	_____
3pm-4pm	_____
4pm-5pm	_____
5pm-6pm	_____
6pm-7pm	_____
7pm-8pm	_____
8pm-9pm	_____
9pm-10pm	_____
10pm-11pm	_____
11pm-12am	_____

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

A Day in the Life Activity (continued - week 7)

Review your daily schedule from above. What do you notice about how you spend your time? Now, if you are a middle or high-school athlete, a majority of the time from 8am-3pm will probably be spent in school. That is understandable. What you do from the time your school day is done until you begin your nightly routine will make a difference in how well you perform and whether or not you are going to achieve your goals. What did you include in your daily routine that could be replaced with some of the strategies you have already learned about? Where are you able to include a daily 10-minute walk of gratitude? Where are you able to include your reflective journaling? How much time do you spend on social media during the day—could that time be replaced with a daily 5 to 10-minute mindfulness, visualization, or meditation session? These strategies are what the best of the best athletes incorporate into their daily routine.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

How Much Do You Get Out of An Hour? Activity - (Week 7)

Success is all about the fundamentals. And the fundamentals are little, ordinary, and often boring to work on. However, in order to be the very best, you must master them. Also, you must become a master of the ordinary. In every act of greatness, whether in sports or academics, the best of the best accomplish extraordinary feats by doing ordinary things with extraordinary consistency, commitment, and focus. There isn't that much of a difference between the best athletes and the good to average athletes. They may have comparable training programs and access to similar coaches. The difference between the best and the good can be found in the mundane. It is in the mundane where you see greatness rise. The best athletes do little things every day a little better than everyone else. They take the time and energy to focus on small activities and actions needed to achieve greatness. Moreover, they don't just do the ordinary things when they feel like it - Instead; they do the ordinary simple things every day, without fail. The key is to practice and get a little bit better every day deliberately. Over time little improvements each week lead to big results next month and next year.

Ponder: Think about your daily rituals or routines. Do you have established daily routines that guide you throughout the day? Do you go to sleep at the same time every night? Do you wake up at the same time every morning? Or, do you mindlessly go through your day without any rhyme or reason to what you do? For example, your mundane task may be to make sure you complete all your weekly weight room sessions. Another mundane task may be to complete mindfulness activities before you go to bed every night or to complete visualization techniques every morning before you get out of bed in the morning.

As you strive to be your best, what actions do you need to take to remain focused on your mundane tasks? How will you take care of your body? How will you deal with other demands of life? What habits do you need to incorporate into your training and life to help you improve each day? For example, you may feel as though you are not getting enough sleep at night. Rather than getting 8-9 hours of sleep per night, you may be getting only 5-6 hours. What would you need to prioritize in your life in order to get more sleep each night? Would you need assistance and guidance with efficient time management skills, less time spent on social media, not wasting time during the day, etc.?

Instruct Athletes: First write down a few of your daily rituals if you have some - make note of whether you do these regularly or just sometimes. Next, think about 1-2 small things you might add into your daily routine that will help you accomplish your goals. Write those down and then begin practicing them for one week.



About Whole Child Connection

The Whole Child Connection at Children's Institute works to facilitate a transformation in settings where children grow, learn, and play so that all adults intentionally foster the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills young people need to be successful. We do that through consultation, coaching, and professional learning experiences for individuals and systems across the education, health, and human services sectors.

About the Author

Charles J. Infurna, Ed.D., has over a decade of coaching experience where he has mentored high school, collegiate, and post-collegiate athletes. He has coached one national record holder, three national champion throwers, as well as dozens of All-Americans in throwing events (hammer, weight throw). He maintains a USATF club focused on the development of young throwers in the region. Through his Forza Athletics track and field club, Dr. Infurna has coached athletes at the USATF senior national championships, as well as a high school national champion thrower. Dr. Infurna is one of a few coaches to have coached multiple male New York State throwers over distances of 70' in the weight throw and 50' in the shot put in the same season. Dr. Infurna holds a Bachelor's Degree in childhood education from SUNY Fredonia and a doctorate in Executive Leadership from St. John Fisher College.

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STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

274 N. Goodman Street, Suite D103
Rochester, New York 14607
(585) 295-1000 (phone)
(585) 295-1090 (fax)
(877) 888-7647 (toll-free)

www.childrensinstitute.net

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