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STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND  
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

## Comparison of Social Emotional Assessments, Curricula, and Competencies

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SEPTEMBER 2017

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## Executive Summary

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Social emotional learning assessments differ in format and in content. This report aims to explore the formats and contents of social emotional learning assessments and curricula. This exploration can be utilized in future attempts to create new social emotional learning assessments, allowing developers to view the gaps between curricula and assessments, observe how the objective and assessment items are typically structured, and consider some of the limitations associated with current social emotional learning assessments.

### Major Findings

- ❖ When the social emotional learning curricula and assessment are compared, there are gaps between what the curricula aim to teach and what the assessment tools aim to assess.
- ❖ For the Pre-K social emotional learning curricula, most of the objectives focus on feelings, self-management and relationship skills.
- ❖ Many of the assessments are not purely competency-based. There is a lack of strength-based tools that comprehensively cover all of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) core social emotional learning competencies.
- ❖ There is a need for social emotional assessment tools that assess all of CASEL's core social emotional competencies.

## Introduction

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The present effort involved a review of the social emotional learning literature primarily focused on preschool children, with the ultimate purpose of developing a standardized and strength-based assessment tool to:

- ❖ Measure social emotional competencies in children ages three to five
- ❖ Identify competency areas that need to be enhanced
- ❖ Link assessment to intervention by providing targeted strategies to teach and support children acquiring these skills

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has created a framework that defines social emotional learning through a set of five core competencies that aid both children and adults in successful use of skills involving emotions, goal setting, relationships, awareness of others, and making decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017). CASEL's definitions for these core competencies can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. CASEL's Definitions of the Five Core Social Emotional Competencies (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017)

### Self-awareness

The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a growth mindset.

- ❖ Identify emotions
- ❖ Accurate self-perception
- ❖ Recognizing strengths
- ❖ Self-confidence
- ❖ Self-efficacy

### Self-management

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations – effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- ❖ Impulse control
- ❖ Stress management
- ❖ Self-discipline
- ❖ Self-motivation
- ❖ Goal setting
- ❖ Organizational skills

### Social Awareness

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- ❖ Perspective-taking
- ❖ Empathy
- ❖ Appreciating diversity
- ❖ Respect for others

### Relationship Skills

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed

- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Social engagement
- ❖ Relationship-building
- ❖ Teamwork

### Responsible decision-making

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- ❖ Identifying problems
- ❖ Analyzing situations
- ❖ Solving problems
- ❖ Evaluating
- ❖ Reflecting
- ❖ Ethical responsibility

Note. The Core Social Emotional Competencies are part of CASEL's Framework and can be found at <http://www.casel.org/core-competencies/>

## Overview of SEL Curricula

Curricula were chosen based on various factors. Researchers looked for curricula that were social emotional learning skills based and had programs developed for preschool curricula. These three particular curricula were also chosen based on their availability.

### ***PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) Preschool***

PATHS Preschool is a nine-unit social emotional learning program that uses 44 lessons to teach children in preschool classrooms about basic and more advanced feelings, friendship, problem solving skills, and self-control (Domitrovich, Greenberg, Kusché, & Cortes, 2004). The first unit introduces relevant concepts to facilitate implementation of the rest of the lesson. Four units focus on feelings. The topics of self-control, friendship, and problem solving are presented in separate units. The final unit prepares students for transition from preschool to kindergarten.

### ***Merrell's Strong Start Pre-K Second Edition***

Merrell's Strong Start for Preschool is a ten-week social emotional learning program for use in early childhood educational settings (Whitcomb & Parisi Damico, 2016). This SEL curriculum program aims to use developmentally appropriate techniques to enhance preschool children's development of emotional awareness, problem solving skills, and social skills in hopes of preventing behavioral issues. Seven of the ten lessons deal with emotions ranging from the children understanding their own feelings and appropriate reactions to their feelings to understanding the feelings of others. The last three lessons consist of teaching social skills, problem solving skills, and reviewing content from previous lessons.

### ***Second Step® Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning***

Second Step® is a 28-week social emotional learning program curriculum broken into five units. The program is often used in tandem with the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers Second Edition (DECA-P2) (Committee for Children, 2012). Second Step® focuses on enhancing children's development of self-regulation skills, empathy, emotional regulation skills, friendship skills, and problem solving. These focus areas are worked on in units one through four of the Second Step® program, whereas unit five focuses on moving to Kindergarten (Committee for Children, 2012). The Second Step® program aims to enhance children's school readiness and success in the classroom while decreasing problem behaviors and increasing pro-social behavior.

## Overview of SEL Assessments

Five social emotional learning assessment tools were chosen to be reviewed and compared in this report. These assessments were chosen for a number of reasons including availability, alignment with CASEL's core competencies, and/or development for classroom use with pre-school students. The DECA-P2 (2012), the SEARS-T (2011), and the SSIS (2008) were addressed by Denham (2015) in the Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning and Research Practice.

***Devereux Student Strengths Assessment Second Step® Edition (2012)***

The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment Second Step® Edition (DESSA-SSE) is a social emotional learning assessment with 36 items (Devereux Center for Resilient Children, 2016). The DESSA-SSE is used to assess children from Kindergarten to Grade 5. The DESSA-SSE was created from the DESSA (Devereux Student Strengths Assessment) and is aligned with the Second Step® SEL curriculum (Low, Cook, Smolkowski, & Butain-Ricklefs, 2015).

***Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers Second Edition (2012)***

The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers Second Edition (DECA-P2) is a social emotional assessment behavior rating scale that was designed for children from ages 3 through 5 years old (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2012). The 38 questions assessment asks the test administrator to reflect upon a child's behavior for the past four weeks and rate each item's frequency on a five point scale, ranging from never to very frequently. All items on the DECA-P2 are associated with one of four subscales, including initiative, self-regulation, attachment/relationships, and behavioral concerns. The test administrator for the DECA-P2 can be a parent or a teacher (Denham, 2015).

***Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scale Teacher Rating Form (2011)***

The Social-Emotional Asset and Resilience Scale Teacher Rating Form (SEARS-T) from 2011 is a 41 item social emotional assessment behavior rating scale that is administered by a teacher or another member of school personnel (Merrell, 2011). The SEARS-T was designed for students in grades Kindergarten through 12. The assessment asks teachers to rate a student on a four-point scale ranging from never to always for 41 items while reflecting upon the last three to six months.

***Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (2010)***

The Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (T-CRS 2.1) is a 32-item rating scale with 16 positive items and 16 negative items (Perkins & Hightower, 2002). All items are grouped into one of four primary scales that include task orientation, behavior control, assertiveness, and peer social skills. The T-CRS 2.1 is used by teachers to assess children for social emotional competencies as well as social emotional problems, particularly in a school setting.

***Social Skills Improvement System for P-12th (2008)***

The Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) is a SEL rating scale that assesses social behavior of children in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12 (Denham, 2015). The SSIS consists of a number of subscales including communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, self-control, and a problem behavior scale addressing patterns of externalizing, bullying, hyperactivity/inattention, internalizing, and Autism Spectrum (Gresham, & Elliot, 2008).

## Process

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1. Literature relative to social emotional learning was researched, and social emotional screening and assessment tools and curricula for preschool and early elementary school were reviewed.
2. Social emotional skills and social emotional learning were defined based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) five core social emotional competencies and Social Emotional Learning definition. A critical premise was made that social emotional competencies, like other skills (academic, adaptive, language, leisure, sport, art...), may be taught and learned by children.
3. Components of existent social emotional curricula (Merrell's Strong Start Pre-K 2nd Edition 2016, Preschool PATHS, Second Step®) for preschool children were examined and organized into the CASEL five core social emotional competencies.
4. Single items from existent social emotional assessments/screeners were mapped out into the curricula components which had been organized into the five social emotional competency areas (see Figure 2). The social emotional assessments/screeners looked at in this report include: The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers Second Edition (2012), the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment Second Step® Edition and Crosswalk (2016), the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scale Teacher Rating Form (2011), and the Social Skills Improvement System for P-12th (2008).

An original report contained tables with much more specific data on the various SEL curricula and SEL assessment tools. The presentation in the current version is much more general in order to not violate the copyright of any SEL curricula or assessment tools.

## Findings

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- ❖ Currently there are very few instruments that measure social emotional skills in preschool children with good psychometric properties: accurate, reliable and valid (Rossi, 2016).
- ❖ The majority of these tools are not strength-based: developed in the psychopathological field for diagnostic purposes, they tend to identify problem behaviors and mental health disorders, rather than measuring social and emotional competency level (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).
- ❖ A few tools were specifically developed to measure social emotional skills (Denham, 2015; LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2012; Perkins & Hightower, 2010). Among these tools are the DECA, T-CRS, DESSA, SEARS, and BERS2.
- ❖ There are not social emotional assessment tools for young children that are aligned with the five core CASEL competencies, with exception of the Social Skills Improvement System – Social Emotional Learning Edition (SSIS-SEL) developed by Gresham & Elliot, which has just been released by Pearson and the DESSA, which measures social emotional competencies in children K to grade 8, but not in preschoolers.
  - The DECA-P2 does not align completely with CASEL’s current SEL model (Denham, 2015).
  - The SSIS has some scales that overlap with the SEL model presented by CASEL (Denham, 2015).
- ❖ There are not many specific tools for preschool children that assess the competencies targeted in social emotional curricula in young children, are validated for that purpose, and are sensitive to the change that SEL interventions should produce (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). For example, the DESSA-SSE is aligned with Second Step® but does not appear to align with the CASEL 5 core competencies.

## Assessment Specific Findings

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- ❖ Objectives within social emotional learning curricula addressed mostly self-management and relationship skills.
- ❖ Some of the items from the SEL assessments did not pair with any of the SEL curricula objectives and not all of the SEL curricula objectives paired with SEL assessment items.
- ❖ Some SEL curricula objectives had corresponding SEL Assessment tool items that were competency items, problem behavior indicator items, or a mixture of both. Problem behavior indicator items were usually phrased in a non-competency format (e.g. “Child does not make eye contact,”) however some were in a competency format. Some objectives only had items that paired with problem behavior indicators items, giving only examples of non-competency format assessment items for that specific objective.
- ❖ SEL Assessment Items that did not match any curricula objectives could usually be fit into one of CASEL’s five core SEL competencies. For example, items from the Autism Spectrum Indicator Scale of the Social Skills Improvement System Assessment tool could often times fit within the core competencies relating to Relationship Skills or Self-Management, however did not pair well with any specific SEL curricula objectives.
- ❖ Many of the SEL assessment items from the DECA-P2 and SSIS that did not match a SEL curricula objective were items that fell within behavioral concern sub-scales.
- ❖ The items from the peer social skills scale of the T-CRS 2.1 did not directly match any SEL curricula objectives; however they all were encompassed by the relationship skills competency as defined by CASEL.
- ❖ There were two common formats for assessment tools items found within the five different assessments investigated in this report. Both formats contained a time frame for which the assessor would be assessing the behavior of the child, details of actions or behaviors in the forms of competencies, and a Likert or Likert like Scale. However, these formats differed in presentation and in grammatical structure.

Figure 2. Objectives obtained from the three curricula examined are categorized into SEL competency areas and matched with assessment tool item types (competency questions labeled as C, behavioral concern/problem labeled as P) for items that would match the curricula objective.

Objective	SEL Competencies					Curriculum			Assessment Tools				
	Self Awareness	Social Awareness	Self Management	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making	PATHS	Second Step	Strong Start	DECA-P2	SSIS - 3rd Grade	DESSA-SSE	SEARS-T-2011	T-CRS 2.1
Name feelings	X					X	X	X					
Verbally expresses feelings	X					X					C		
Expressing feelings in appropriate ways	X					X	X	X	C & P				P
Identifies/Labels/Recognizes own feelings	X					X	X						
Identify or explain causes of feelings (personal/situational)	X					X		X					
Identify/Recognize differences between comfortable and uncomfortable feelings	X					X		X					
Expresses positive feelings & appropriate responses in response to compliments	X					X				C & P			
Understanding that all feelings are OK	X	X				X							
Identification of others feelings		X				X				C		C	
Understanding that other people have feelings too		X				X							
Understanding that other people can feel different things in the same/similar situations		X				X	X				C	C	
Identify what others are feeling through visual cues		X				X	X	X				C	
Expresses feelings through okay/not okay behaviors			X			X		X					

SEL Competencies

Curriculum

Assessment Tools

Objective	SEL Competencies					Curriculum			Assessment Tools				
	Self Awareness	Social Awareness	Self Management	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making	PATHS	Second Step	Strong Start	DECA-P2	SSIS -3rd Grade	DESSA-SSE	SEARS-T-2011	T-CRS 2.1
Utilizes self-control techniques (stops, take a breath, state problem and associated feelings)			X			X		X			C	C	
Listening/Following Rules			X				X	X			C	C	P
Pays attention			X				X		C		C		C & P
Uses techniques to avoid frustration due to activity change (i.e. monitoring time)			X				X						
Remembers directions/takes steps to remember directions			X				X		C		C		C
Follows directions			X				X			C	C		C & P
Child verbally and appropriately expresses needs and desires			X				X		C	C		C	
Identifies that not all behavior is okay, even though all emotions are			X				X			C			
Identifies the difference between an accident (unintentional action) and intentional actions that lead to negative consequences			X				X						
Uses strategies to relax/calm down.			X				X	X		C			C
Self-comforting			X					X	C			C	C
Takes turns			X				X			P	C		

Objective	SEL Competencies					Curriculum			Assessment Tools				
	Self Awareness	Social Awareness	Self Management	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making	PATHS	Second Step	Strong Start	DECA-P2	SSIS -3rd Grade	DESSA-SSE	SEARS-T-2011	T-CRS 2.1
Makes decisions after calming strong feelings			X				X						
Listening to the emotions of others				X		X							
Playing with others				X		X	X		C	C			
Helping others				X		X				C	C	C	
Sharing with others				X		X	X	X	C				
Positive Talk/Complimenting others				X		X		X			C	C	
Shows support to others				X		X							
Shows respect for others				X		X	X		C	C			
Shows caring for others				X		X				C	C	C	
Inclusion of others				X		X				C & P			
Inviting others to play				X			X			C & P			
Joining in playing				X			X	X		C			P
Shares ideas with group				X			X						C
Listens to others				X			X	X	C				
Cooperates with others				X			X	X		P			
Trusts others				X			X		C			C	
Acknowledges the feelings of others by saying kind things				X			X				C		

SEL Competencies

Curriculum

Assessment Tools

Objective	SEL Competencies					Curriculum			Assessment Tools				
	Self Awareness	Social Awareness	Self Management	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making	PATHS	Second Step	Strong Start	DECA-P2	SSIS -3rd Grade	DESSA-SSE	SEARS-T-2011	T-CRS 2.1
Acknowledges the feelings of others by doing kind things				X			X				C		
Plays with other children				X			X						
Trade with other children				X			X						
Shows respect for others				X		X							
Understands that poor choices may lead to negative consequences					X	X							
Identifies problems /problem situations					X	X		X					
Generates prosocial solutions					X	X		X		C & P		C	
Thinks problems through to logical consequences					X	X				P	C	C	
Makes decision while calm					X	X				C			
Uses calming techniques before making decisions					X		X	X	C	C			
Tries different strategies to solve a problem					X		X		C		C		C
Solves problems					X		X				C	C	
Makes decisions					X		X		C				
Thinks of safe ideas for solving problems					X		X	X					

Note: Information gathered from PATHS (Domitrovich et al, 2004), Second Step® (Committee for Children, 2011), Merrell’s Strong Start (Whitcomb & Parisi Damico, 2016), DECA-P2 (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2012), SSIS (Gresham & Elliott, 2008), SEARS-T (Merrell, 2011), DESSA-SSE (Devereux Center for Resilient Children, 2016), and T-CRS 2.1 (Perkins & Hightower, 2010).

## Issues

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- ❖ Several assessment items are not always clearly defined in objective and behavioral terms and are open to subjective interpretations.
- ❖ It is difficult to include some assessment items into one or the other competency since the five core competencies are described as if distinct from one another, when in reality some are more complex and are built on the acquisition of the simpler competencies. For example, a prerequisite of self-management skills is self-awareness, and a prerequisite of social relationships skills is social-awareness; responsible decision requires acquiring of all the other social emotional skills. Most of the social emotional curricula show this progress.
- ❖ More research should be done on the potential of halo effect to impact results of teacher rated SEL assessments and the influence on perceived growth on post measures. Halo effect is the tendency of teachers or assessors to rate children more negatively or positively depending on the overall impression (Abikoff, Courtney, Pelham, & Koplevicz, 1993). There may be concerns that rating scales do not accurately capture a child's social-emotional knowledge but are based on teacher's judgment about certain child's knowledge.

## Recommendations

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- ❖ Develop a hybrid measure that both directly assesses a child's knowledge of feelings and understanding of social emotional situations and ask teachers to estimate child's behavior that are observable.
- ❖ Define items for rating scale in observable, objective and behavioral terms.
- ❖ In direct assessment, correctly identifying feeling pictures does not correspond to awareness of the feelings of others.
- ❖ Since generally social emotional curricula include a core of similar competencies (feeling awareness in self and others, social skills, self-regulation and problem solving), assessment items should be aligned with and capture these competencies, and exclude items that are not associated with them.
- ❖ The tool should show progression from awareness to problem solving.
- ❖ It should be both a formative and standardized tool.

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