

## Social-emotional Learning at the Foundational Stage

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### Abstract

*Social-emotional Learning (SEL) is an essential skill for both children and adults, particularly during the foundational years of a child's life, aged 3–8 years. This article explores what SEL looks like at this early stage and emphasises its importance for holistic development. It discusses strategies for integrating SEL practices into daily life for teachers, parents and caregivers who work with children. This article also discusses practical implications of the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) framework, emphasising activities that promote emotional expression, relationship management, empathy and effective communication. The objective of the article is to highlight the importance of early implementation of these skills and to offer insights for integrating SEL practices into daily interactions. By highlighting these approaches, the article encourages adults to foster children's social-emotional development through meaningful actions.*

### INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

One afternoon, Avni, a seven-year-old girl, decided to sneak out when her mother was asleep; she sneaked out with her doll and called her neighbourhood friend, Neha, to play. Both girls went to the backyard to play and decided to give the doll a name. After some discussion, both decided to name her 'Disha'. As they started playing, they decided to dress

up Disha. That's when Neha said, "Let's get her married". Avni added, "And then she will have a family and so many other relationships", highlighting the different relationships she will have in her life ahead. The girls began to explore other emotions as they continued to play, with Avni thinking, 'How will Disha manage her own emotions if she's feeling sad or nervous' and 'How will Disha help her friends if they are sad?'. Neha added,

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“She can always sit with them and talk to them to make them feel better.” Both girls discussed various situations and emotions that they might go through as they grow up.

While playing, they further explored emotions, solved conflicts together, and tried to understand the various relationships and issues that might come with it. This foundational experience of Avni and Neha is not just about entertaining themselves but also understanding the varied intricacies of building relationships, understanding emotions and overcoming challenges—all a part of social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning, popularly known as SEL, is a process by which children and adults learn how to establish healthy relationships, manage emotions, show and feel empathy, and make informed decisions. Social-emotional learning is a vital part of child development and education, helping children and adults develop better relationships, navigate through difficult times in life, and lead a better life. It is a process that helps people of all ages.

Historically, social-emotional learning was first discussed in ancient Greece by the philosopher Plato, who, with regards to education, proposed a holistic curriculum that focuses on a balance of training in physical education, arts, maths, science, character and moral judgment. Later in the 1960s, the Yale University initiated a pilot programme focusing on the impact of homeschool experiences on children’s

psychosocial development and academic success. By 1980, these schools saw significant improvements, with students surpassing national academic standards and reductions in behavioural issues and truancy. Gradually, other organisations like the Committee for Children and CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) emerged, contributing to a report defining the goals of SEL. In recent years, the importance of SEL has grown, particularly highlighted by the COVID 19 pandemic.

CASEL is based on making social and emotional learning equitable and an integral part of education. It has given the CASEL framework called the CASEL 5 or CASEL Wheel, which highlights five broad competencies, which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, which can further be taught and applied to different settings, like families, communities, schools and classrooms. These five competencies stand for:

1. *Self-awareness*: This involves an individual’s ability to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts and values, and how they influence behaviour. It includes the ability to recognise one’s strengths and weaknesses, identify one’s emotions, develop interest and have a sense of purpose.
2. *Self-management*: This includes the ability to manage one’s emotions, thoughts and behaviours effectively

in different situations. This also comprises the ability to delay gratification, manage stress and set clear goals, exhibiting self-motivation.

3. *Social awareness*: This includes the ability to understand the perspective of others, empathise, and include people of varied cultures and contexts. This also includes the capacity to feel for others, understand social and historical norms for behaviour, recognise strengths in others, recognise situational demands and opportunities, as well as understand the influence of systems on behaviour.
4. *Relationship skills*: This is the ability to build and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, and navigate situations with diverse individuals. It also covers the ability to communicate clearly, listen actively, solve problems effectively, resolve conflicts constructively, show leadership qualities, and seek as well as offer support whenever needed.
5. *Responsible decision-making*: It includes the ability to make ethical and constructive choices about personal and social situations. It includes the capacity to reconsider choices, evaluate the benefits of various actions, learn to make reasoned judgments, and reflect on one's role to promote personal, family and community well-being.



Figure 1: CASEL Wheel

### IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AT THE FOUNDATIONAL STAGE

While SEL is important throughout all age groups, the importance cannot be undermined at the foundational stage of a child's life, i.e., 3–8 years of age. The early years of a child's life hold utmost importance, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development. It is in these years that the child's brain is developing rapidly and forms neural connections, making it a critical period for the development of various skills. The first five years of a child's life are crucial as 90 per cent of the brain's development takes place during this time, laying the foundation for the development of various domains like socio-emotional, physical and cognitive.

The early years are also critical as a child learns to form various relationships with caregivers and siblings in the home, as well as in the

school setting. Social and emotional skills allow the child to understand and form better relationships, which in turn impact the relationships they will hold in the future. Children also begin to form their identity, understand their emotions and learn to interact with others.

Another important factor that makes the early years critical and important for social-emotional interventions is the academic success related to social-emotional interventions. A study, conducted by Blair (2002), and Diamond and Lee (2011), suggested that early social-emotional competencies, such as behavioural regulation, attentional skills and the ability to solve problems are critical to children's academic outcomes.

Another meta-analysis reviewed over 200 studies and found that students who participated in SEL programmes showed significant improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance. These effects were sustained over time, indicating that early interventions can lead to lasting benefits in various areas of life, including emotional well-being and academic success, highlighting the long-term effects of social-emotional learning.

## **INTEGRATING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AT THE FOUNDATIONAL STAGE**

Integrating social-emotional learning practices at the foundational stage, which consists of the preschool and

Grades 1 and 2, can have some long-lasting benefits, as this is the stage where the child learns to form relationships, understand emotions, and build an identity of their own.

### **Applying the CASEL 5 to the Foundational Stage**

The CASEL 5 or the CASEL Wheel can be applied to the foundational stage, which consists of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Let us try and understand how these five competencies can be applied to the foundational stage.

1. *Self-awareness*: Developing self-awareness is fundamental, as through this skill the child learns to recognise and understand their own emotions, which lays the groundwork for further emotional regulation. Activities that lead to self-awareness can be used with children, like using picture cards, the emotions wheel, introducing emotions through stories or case studies, and using emotional journals or picture-based journals, where the children can write about their feelings and share their experiences. By integrating these simple activities, the parents and educators can take a step towards helping the child to be more self-aware. Self-awareness at the foundational stage can look like a child expressing his/her feelings by saying, "I feel sad when my friend doesn't want to play".

This shows that they can identify and articulate their emotions.

2. *Self-management*: Teaching simple strategies to manage oneself and their emotions, simple goal-setting activities, waiting for and taking turns in games, and sharing toys with others help in encouraging self-discipline. It also helps children to develop resilience and the ability to cope with challenges. Self-management at this stage can be seen as a child taking a few deep breaths and taking a moment to reflect on his/her actions when things don't go their way.
3. *Social awareness*: Understanding another person's perspective through activities that promote understanding of others' feelings, such as role-play and group games, and discussing diversity and empathy helps children to appreciate differences. It also helps in fostering a sense of community and respect for others, which is crucial in a multicultural setting. Social awareness at this early stage can look like inviting a child sitting alone to play, showing recognition of other person's emotions.
4. *Relationship skills*: Relationship skills are of utmost importance, as building healthy relationships is foundational for social development and collaboration. Children also learn to communicate effectively, and cooperate with peers through collaborative projects and activities that require teamwork, which also in turn helps in communication and conflict resolution. Example of relationship skills at an early age can look like two children arguing over a toy and one suggesting, "Let's play with it together", showing conflict resolution skills.
5. *Responsible decision-making*: It promotes a sense of accountability and ethical reasoning from a young age. Simple scenarios can help children practise making choices and consider the consequences of these choices. Reflective activities and discussions will also help in developing this skill. Responsible decision-making at this stage might look like understanding and following rules, seeking help when stuck and thinking before acting.

Apart from these, SEL can be integrated into the daily curriculum and classroom transactions with the use of stories, art-integrated activities and play-based activities. Role-plays and case discussions related to lessons from textbooks can also be done.

From early childhood and even before birth, brain development is influenced by the social and emotional environment to which a child is exposed (Farah, 2017). Hence, family plays a vital role in a child's life. Involving the caregivers and teaching them how to inculcate SEL at an early age helps the parents to guide their child's behaviour and help them develop these skills early on. Parents should also model healthy behaviour,

as it is at this stage that children learn by observing. Reinforcing the positive behaviours can also help children develop appropriate behaviour patterns.

## CONCLUSION

Aristotle had said, “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”. Social-emotional learning not only entails education of mind but also the heart of the child. By prioritising SEL, we are not only educating our children academically but also nurturing

empathetic, responsible and socially-aware individuals, who are equipped to contribute positively to their communities and the world. The role of families in this process cannot be undermined; by involving caregivers and providing them with the tools to reinforce SEL at home, we can create a consistent and supportive environment for children. This collaboration between teachers and families helps to ensure that children learn to navigate their emotions and relationships effectively, paving the way for lifelong success and well-being.

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