

Social-Emotional Development as a Key to Success

Catching Up With COSSAP, June 2020 Edition

Social-emotional skills are essential for success in family relationships and in school, workplace, and community settings. Moreover, they are increasingly recognized as important to success in a variety of life outcomes, such as fewer conduct problems, lower levels of emotional distress, and positive well-being. Of particular relevance to communities battling substance abuse, social-emotional skills are also associated with improved academic and employment outcomes and may buffer against a variety of negative outcomes later in life, including criminal activity and addiction.

For tribal communities, many of which experience high poverty levels and limited access to behavioral health or mental health resources, development of social-emotional skills can be leveraged by individuals at any level—parents and caregivers, school officials, or community leaders—to maximize the capacity of these skills to protect against negative outcomes.

What is social-emotional development?

Social-emotional development can be defined as a process through which individuals acquire skills to increase self-awareness, improve relationships with others, and achieve their goals. It involves the learning of skills in five different areas: awareness of self, management of self, awareness of others, relationship management, and responsible decision making.¹ Although social-emotional development is key in childhood, we learn and continue to develop these skills across our entire lives. Healthy social-emotional development can mitigate the negative impacts of adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and substance misuse.² Social-emotional development means intentionally focusing on the development of these skills in everyday interactions. Given the interactional nature of these skills, they are best

learned in a social context and through relationships with parents, caregivers, teachers, siblings, peers, tribal elders, and community leaders.

What is the relevance of social-emotional skill development for a tribal population?

Although diverse in terms of geography, culture, and heritage, the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people make up only 2 percent of the U.S. population. As a people, this diverse and heterogeneous group has experienced historical traumas such as forced relocation, cultural assimilation, numerous broken treaties, and other social, economic, and political injustices. As a result, AI/AN people experience huge social and economic disparities, are 14 percent more likely to live in poverty, are 50 percent more likely to experience psychological distress, and have rates of addiction that are twice the national average.³ These communities also experience high rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic abuse, child neglect, substandard housing, and lack of job opportunities. Of particular concern, suicide rates among AI/AN adolescents are the highest of any race.⁴

While there is no doubt that solutions to these challenges exist within tribal communities, social-emotional skill development offers an opportunity to support children, families, and communities in a synergistic way. As noted above, social and emotional skills are linked to improved behavioral outcomes,⁵ improved academic outcomes,⁶ and positive employment outcomes, such as obtaining stable employment and being employed full-time. Social and emotional skills buffer against a variety of negative outcomes later in life, including police arrest, need for public assistance, and substance misuse.⁷

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What are the specific skills?

Social-emotional development is the process of learning skills regarding self, others, and decision making. Specifically, they include being able to name and manage emotions, convey empathy and understanding to others, make prosocial decisions, act responsibly, establish and maintain positive relationships, and avoid antisocial behaviors.⁸

- **Skills regarding self:** These skills are about increasing self-awareness and developing the ability to manage ourselves. Increasing self-awareness means that we can identify our thoughts, emotions, values, and beliefs and are able to see how they impact our behavior. Self-management means that we can regulate our emotions, change our thoughts, control our impulses, and improve our motivation or discipline. Specific skills include impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, and organizational skills. Improved self-awareness and self-management skills support a growth mind-set and lead to higher self-confidence, optimism, self-efficacy, and acknowledgement of strengths.
- **Skills regarding others:** These skills are about increasing our awareness of others, developing the ability to take someone else's perspective, and being able to empathize with others regardless of differences. Awareness of others supports an appreciation of diversity and cultivates a respect for our own and others' social and ethical norms. These skills also include the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships with others. This requires strong listening and communication skills, skills to manage social pressure, and conflict engagement skills.
- **Skills regarding decision making:** Making responsible, ethical, and prosocial decisions builds on the previous two sets of skills and includes an understanding and respect for social norms. This means developing the ability to identify and resolve problems, understand and evaluate the consequences of our actions, and consider impacts on ourselves and others before making.

How do we support development of social-emotional skills?

Social and emotional skills are developed through relationships, interactions, and ongoing social situations. Four specific strategies for developing them are naming, modeling, exploring, and practicing.

- **Naming:** Development of social and emotional skills begins with increasing awareness of the five social emotional skills (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) in their naturally occurring contexts. This means noticing the skill in yourself and others and naming the skill. If you are supporting a child's skill, this might be expressed as "Good work pausing before responding to your friend" or "I like how you brainstormed several ideas before picking one."
- **Modeling:** Social-emotional skills are taught through modeling. They are developed through watching others and learning from their behaviors. Whether we are modeling a behavior for children, our peers, or our families, it is helpful to view our actions as teachable moments. These skills can be learned; therefore, information and feedback are pathways to learning and not a reflection of a person's worth. When we model actions, they present an opportunity for learning, not just for us but for anyone watching. We can talk about what went well or where we can improve. This vulnerability in learning models both self-awareness and self-management skills.
- **Exploring:** Ultimately, social-emotional development results in positive and prosocial decision making. Exploring means talking about the decision making to increase understanding about how a decision was made. Exploring highlights gaps in the four other social and emotional skills (self-awareness, self-management, awareness of others, relationship management) and can reveal values or highlight habitual patterns in thinking and decision making.
- **Practicing:** Just like any other skills, social and emotional skills do not always come naturally and can

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feel awkward or uncomfortable. Start by practicing these skills in low-impact, low-stress environments where mistakes have limited negative impact. Pick one skill to start with and focus only on that. Avoid complicating things so that learning can happen in a constructive way. When we intentionally think about practicing a skill versus performing a skill, we can stay in a mind-set that allows us to learn. This allows us to ask for (or offer) a “redo.” We get to try it again in a different way or allow another person to try it again.

Conclusion

Social-emotional development is a process to acquire essential life skills focused on knowing yourself, knowing others, and achieving your goals. These skills can be developed over an entire lifespan and are learned through building awareness, modeling, and intentionally practicing. Development of social and emotional skills is critical to success in life, since these skills are correlated with outcomes such as academic success and emotional well-being in childhood, as well as improved work performance and higher pay in adulthood. The importance of recognizing cultural differences and understanding that every community and/or culture, including AI/AN peoples, has different characteristics cannot be overstated. For all communities and cultures, development of social and emotional skills may prove instrumental to success on a variety of fronts.

Endnotes

¹Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2019). *Social and Emotional Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.

²Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2018). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>.

³Moon, H., Lee, Y. S., Roh, S., and Burnette, C. E. (2018). Factors Associated with American Indian Mental Health Service Use in Comparison with White Older Adults. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 5(4), 847–859. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-017-0430-5>.

⁴U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Supporting the Development of Young Children in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities Who Are Affected by Alcohol and Substance Exposure*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchconnections.org/childcare/resources/34022/pdf>.

⁵Domitrovich, C., Durlak, J. A., Staley, K., and Weissberg, R. (2017). Social-Emotional Competence: An Essential Factor for Promoting Positive Adjustment and Reducing Risk in School Children. *Child Development*, 88(2), 408–416.

⁶Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., and Crowley, M. (2015). Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(11), 2283–2290. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>.

⁷Mmari, K. N., Blum, R. W., and Teufel-Shone, N. (2010). What Increases Risk and Protection for Delinquent Behaviors Among American Indian Youth?: Findings from Three Tribal Communities. *Youth & Society*, 41(3), 382–413. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X09333645>.

⁸Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2018). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>.