

Using a Developmental Lens to Align Social and Emotional Learning Frameworks, Standards, Practice, and Assessment

Adapted from [Keeping SEL Developmental: The Importance of a Developmental Lens for Fostering and Assessing SEL Competencies](#)

by Susanne Denham

This brief from the American Institutes for Research provides a summary of the Assessment Work Group's Special Issues brief on developmental social and emotional learning (SEL), [Keeping SEL Developmental: The Importance of a Developmental Lens for Fostering and Assessing SEL Competencies](#).

This brief demonstrates how the developmental tasks that children and youth experience at different ages are essential to social and emotional learning (SEL). Development matters for framing, teaching, learning, and assessing SEL. This brief explores social and emotional competencies through a developmental lens. Further, the brief demonstrates the importance of aligning SEL frameworks, standards, instruction, and assessment along a developmental task orientation.

The Importance of a Developmental Lens in SEL

One of the greatest joys of working with children and youth is watching their long-term growth and learning progression. Kindergartners who first learn to share with peers grow up to be teenagers who work together to publish their school newspapers. As children grow, their understanding of themselves and others becomes increasingly complex; they experience more novel situations as their brains grow and develop. This growth and change process, known as *development*, can and should serve as a vital benchmark when shaping SEL instruction and assessment.

Social and emotional (SE) competencies are dynamic, complex, and evolve throughout a child's life. A child's age and developmental stage impacts

ADAPTED BY

Elizabeth Nolan
American Institutes for
Research

Elena Saavedra
American Institutes for
Research

what he or she knows and can do in SEL. Children also express their SE competencies differently according to age. When educators understand and practice this, they use a developmental lens. Some existing SEL resources address and apply a *developmental lens* better than others. For example, self-awareness is an important competency across several frameworks. How does self-awareness look when expressed by toddlers, children, and teens?

Given the variety of SEL programs, strategies, and frameworks available, educators and education leaders may experience challenges in coherently aligning these resources. To align developmental tasks with SEL, this brief proposes a four-step process.

Developmental Frameworks: A Starting Point

Educators can use [frameworks](#) as a starting point for aligning SEL evidence, standards, considering how to create standards to guide SEL practices and assessment. An SEL framework is an organizational system that defines and describes SE competencies, usually based on evidence from more complex theories. Educators should first examine frameworks to determine if they align with developmental tasks.

The [CASEL core competencies](#) framework provides an evidence-based model for five SE competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competencies are implicitly developmental: the five competencies remain

relatively constant in their importance across time, but how these competencies are expressed behaviorally changes as children grow. Middle schoolers may display social awareness by including others who differ into their friendship group. In high school, a student could show social awareness by writing an editorial about inclusiveness.

Frameworks should serve as the foundation for SEL alignment. Most frameworks are evidence-based, and some align well with developmental tasks. Starting with a framework helps educators bring sound evidence to their

SEL alignment process. However, a framework alone cannot fully guide educators' practice. Rarely does a framework define grade by grade competency expressions. Educators must take frameworks a step further.

KEY POINTS

- Children's brains develop, and they have varying new experiences as they mature, enabling them to develop and practice more complex social and emotional competencies.
- Instructional practices that align with such development help reach children where they are.
- Meeting students where they are developmentally is key to providing individualized support and engaging students.
- Foundational SE competency development begins in early childhood. By setting a strong foundation from the start, educators can help children grow into adults with strong SE competencies.
- By designing assessment with development in mind, practitioners can better use data to make developmentally-appropriate improvements.

FOUR STEPS TO SEL ALIGNMENT

1. Consult a developmental framework.
2. Define expressions of competencies across ages and grades, using evidence, to inform standards.
3. Implement SEL strategies with differentiation.
4. Assess ethically and appropriately.

Assessing How Developmental Is a Framework			
Criteria for a Developmentally Informed Framework	Level of Supporting Evidence		
	Evidence Absent	Partial Evidence	Full Evidence
Are developmental tasks for all SEL dimensions complete and sufficiently detailed?	Framework lists tasks to be attained that are very global but do not change with age <i>And/or</i> detail is lacking.	Framework is incomplete in its coverage of developmental change in its dimensions; some dimensions include change across ages, some do not.	Framework gives developmental tasks for each age and for each of its dimensions. Developmental tasks are easily translatable to action for each age level.
How easily do frameworks' elements translate to standards, assessment, and instruction	Overall, it is difficult to translate dimensions into standards and instructional tasks.	Only some tasks are translatable into standards and instructional tasks.	Translation flows clearly from the elements of the framework.

Designing Developmental Standards: A Step Further

With an evidence-based framework in hand, educators and education leaders can move to the next step: designing developmentally-appropriate learning standards or benchmarks. In this step, educators can translate the frameworks foundation to define how SE competencies look at each age and grade.

What should students know and be able to do socially and emotionally as they grow? This depends on several factors. Ideally, educators, education specialists, leaders, and experts in SEL and development work together to define these SE competencies. The working group should employ its knowledge of the local student population alongside the developmental lens. In this way, standards or benchmarks can be designed with development in mind, while also remaining sensitive to local needs.

How does developmental standards alignment look in practice? Take responsible decision making, a common SEL domain, as an example:

- Elementary students can recognize that they have choices in how to respond to situations and could implement stop, think, and enact strategies to solve problems.
- Middle school students could begin to identify and apply steps of systematic decision making, such as weighing options and considering others' perspectives; generate alternate solutions; and evaluate their strategies for avoiding risky behavior.
- High school students would tackle a more difficult task, such as considering ethical, safety, and societal factors when making their personal and interpersonal decisions.

Working Across Differences: What Should Educators Consider to Avoid Pitfalls?

- Not all children will follow a “normal” age-graded developmental trajectory. Some children experience developmental delays. Bringing special education teachers and specialists to the table when designing instruction, assessment, and standards can be a helpful approach.
- Social-emotional competencies may be expressed differently depending on students’ cultural context. Learning about cultural differences can help educators and leaders better design standards, instruction, and assessments.

Implementing Developmental SEL: Bringing the Pieces Together

With standards or benchmarks in place, educators can move to the most important step: instruction. SE competencies can be effectively modeled and taught with a developmental lens. This process may appear less straightforward than in academic subjects, yet similarities exist. Educators know that teaching algebra to a preschooler would be extremely difficult. Preschoolers first need to learn the basics, such as counting. Likewise, in SEL, preschoolers cannot articulate their personal values without guidance. They need a foundational set of competencies to move on to more complex expressions of emotions, problem solving, and communication.

Instruction rarely flows directly from frameworks and standards. However, outlining frameworks and standards upfront establishes clear goals for instructional practice. Educators, especially those new to SEL, need guidance on expected learning outcomes, within which they have flexibility to innovate and adapt their practice. The following table presents an example of applying a developmental lens to the *self-awareness* competency across developmental tasks, frameworks, standards, instruction, and assessment.

Incorporating a Developmental Lens to Designing Self-Awareness Practice			
	Grade level/age		
	Preschool (ages 3–5)	Elementary school (ages 6–13)	High school (ages 14–18)
Developmental task	Recognize and identify expressions and situations of “basic” emotions (happy, sad, angry, scared)	Use thinking to control emotions; purposely hide or express emotions	Understand complex, simultaneous feelings
Framework	Emotion awareness	Self-awareness	Self-awareness
Standard	Associate words with facial expressions	Recognize and label one’s emotions and emotion triggers	Describe how one’s emotions and thoughts drive behavioral responses
Instructional practice	Describe how a peer is feeling	Draw an “anger thermometer”	Practice stress management techniques before taking a big test
Assessment	Direct assessment; teacher ratings of emotion knowledge	Simplistic self-assessment; teacher observations	Self-assessment; verbal or written reflection

Developmental Assessment: Takeaways and Considerations

The fourth step of the process is to assess SEL appropriately, using a developmental lens. Educators' use of assessments may play an integral role in understanding students' social and emotional competencies. Some controversy exists about the best use of assessments, with confusion on assessments based on developmental tasks. [A movement is afoot](#) in the education field to better define, inform, and implement assessments of SEL. In the meantime, educators may use the following considerations and key questions to inform their assessment decisions by using a developmental lens:

REMEMBER TO CONSIDER DEVELOPMENT

- Assessments should be chosen or created in a way that is developmentally informed, inclusive of several age ranges, and consistent with the framework used by the specific state or district. Further, how children describe their social and emotional competencies changes across time. Most aspects of SEL would be difficult for a child in preschool or the primary grades to describe, whereas older elementary students and high schoolers may be better able to self-describe.
- Key questions to consider: Are developmental tasks for all SEL dimensions complete and sufficiently detailed? In other words, can they be translated into actionable instruction and assessment metrics?

USE THE LENS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

- Generally, existing validated SEL measures may have age norms and even different forms for different ages. However, their content may not strictly follow a developmental task orientation or be aligned with a framework. Practitioners should consider the different ways a competency can be expressed, based on a child's developmental period, background, and context.
- Key question to consider: How does one recognize and assess SEL in "quiet" students, English learners, or students with disabilities?

FIELD SPOTLIGHT

SEL instruction and assessment constructed through a developmental lens is possible!

A great example is the [BESST Web assessment tool](#). BESST is guided by the CASEL core competencies framework, which was used to develop the [Illinois SEL Standards](#). Using the standards, instruction is based on appropriate goals and indicators for each grade level, from kindergarten to Grade 8, with connections to specific practices to support each competency assessed.

THINK FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- Summative assessment gives a one-shot glimpse into how a child is feeling on a single day. Because of the variation in student populations, as well as the context-, developmental-, and culture-specific ways that social-emotional competencies develop, assessment should be conducted with the goal of improving competencies and improving instruction, rather than holding students and teachers to task.
- Key question to consider: How will the results of SEL assessment be informed by a strengths-based lens to help children learn and grow rather than label them?

About the Original Author



SUSANNE DENHAM
George Mason University

Susanne Denham is an applied developmental psychologist and University Professor Emerita of psychology at George Mason University. Her funded work centers on social-emotional development of preschoolers, emotional competence and its socialization by pivotal adults (parents and teachers), along with its importance for social and academic functioning. She is the author of two books, *Emotional Development in Young Children* and, with Dr. Rosemary Burton, *Social and Emotional Prevention and Intervention Programming for Preschoolers*, as well as numerous articles. She has consulted on applied and basic research projects on social-emotional interventions, assessment of social-emotional development, and state standards for these skills.

About the Adapters

We are grateful to the American Institutes for Research (AIR) team for their adaptation of this brief and efforts to enhance its utility for practitioners. AIR conducts and applies the best behavioral and social science research and evaluation towards improving people's lives, with a special emphasis on the disadvantaged.

ELIZABETH NOLAN
American Institutes for Research

Elizabeth Nolan is a research associate at AIR. Her research explores the conditions and policies which lead to equitable, supportive school climates and opportunities for holistically defining school success.

ELENA SAAVEDRA
American Institutes for Research

Elena Saavedra is a digital design strategist consultant. Her work focuses on developing user-centered material for learning and training purposes. Her past projects have included developing training materials on SEL for school personnel and implementing a design-thinking approach in the development of a collaborative forum for the U.S. Department of Education.

The Measuring SEL Series of Frameworks Briefs

The *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students* project as guided by the Assessment Work Group (AWG) is dedicated to helping advance the effective use of data to inspire practice in SEL. In deciding how the AWG could best contribute to advancing the field and complement rather than compete with other efforts underway to address the challenges of multiple frameworks and inconsistent use of language, the AWG Frameworks Subgroup, led by Stephanie Jones and Roger Weissberg, developed four series of briefs designed for practitioners. Each series and each brief in the series is designed to help advance how people think about the issues and make reasonable choices that work best for them and their context. We hope they provide a set of “building blocks” that systems and practitioners can use to advance and improve their SEL efforts. Learn more at <https://measuringSEL.casel.org>

Introductory Series

These briefs are about what frameworks are, how they are useful, the challenges and opportunities they present in practice, and defining criteria that are helpful when considering what frameworks to use.

Comparative Series

These briefs explore efforts underway to categorize and align ways of thinking about comparing unique frameworks. The briefs also describe tools available to aid systems and practitioners in their selection and use of a framework.

Special Issues Series

These briefs identify critical issues that frameworks must address or that influence how they are used that are important to consider when selecting and using frameworks, such as equity and SEL, and developmental considerations.

Descriptive Series

These briefs each describe an individual framework currently in use. They are intended to illustrate how frameworks can be analyzed and help practitioners learn to evaluate frameworks on the types of criteria that matter most in their settings. *(The briefs are not an endorsement of these frameworks.)*

The Assessment Work Group is committed to advancing dialogue on key issues in the field and stating a perspective when appropriate. The views and opinions expressed in these briefs reflect the general position of the Assessment Work Group. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CASEL or any of the individual organizations involved with the work group.