

SEL to the Core:

**BUILDING FROM FOUNDATIONAL YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT TO SUPPORT SOCIAL
AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**



In 2015, NAA conducted an online survey to learn more about social and emotional learning (SEL) program practices and needs. Survey findings suggested that, while organizations and programs value SEL and many professionals implement SEL practice, many do not feel knowledgeable talking about SEL. Professionals requested additional SEL related resources—such as practice and activity ideas—and training. As the afterschool field continues to emphasize the importance of social and emotional development, it is essential that leaders and staff have resources to help them understand (1) their own social and emotional competencies to inform their practice and (2) how to provide opportunities that promote social and emotional competence building.

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about SEL & THIS GUIDE



The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

This definition was used to frame the sections in this guide, as CASEL has defined SEL in a specific manner that is both evidence-based and field-tested.

As the definition states, SEL is a **process**. This guide lays out the **practices** that support effective SEL in afterschool programs. Effective SEL fosters the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills (**competencies**, for short) that adults and youth already have and will continue to develop through SEL.

Because there are multiple frameworks and practical resources available to support SEL, this guide does not adhere strictly to any one model. Rather, it reflects those competencies and practices that are widely accepted and included across different field resources.

While it is beyond the scope of this guide to detail each framework, background work examined the prevalent models to identify the competencies commonly included across frameworks. This guide can be used whether a program has adopted, is in the process of adopting, or has yet to consider a specific framework, model or program. Three clusters of competencies are emphasized in this guide:

The self: Self-awareness and understanding one’s identity, self-management including emotion and behavior regulation, persistence, goal-setting, and academic perseverance and mindsets.

Relationships with others: Recognizing emotions in others, empathy, perspective-taking, collaboration, communicating effectively, active listening, flexibility and adaptability.

Decision-making and leadership: Understanding cause and effect, understanding one’s values, and making responsible decisions.

This guide is designed as a supplement to the *NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals (NAA CKCs)*, which present the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by out-of-school time (OST) professionals to provide high-quality youth development programming to support the learning and development of children and youth (NAA, 2011). Core knowledge refers to the expertise needed by professionals to work effectively with school-age children and youth; competencies refer to concrete, observable and achievable behaviors that establish standards of practice. The NAA CKCs include 10 content areas, referred to in Figure 1.



Core Knowledge & COMPETENCIES

for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals



1 | CHILD/YOUTH GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

Knows the typical benchmarks of growth and development and uses this knowledge to provide a program that meets the multiple needs of children and youth.



2 | LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS & CURRICULUM

Creates a high-quality learning environment and implements age-appropriate curricula and program activities.



3 | CHILD/YOUTH OBSERVATION & ASSESSMENT

Understands and applies observation and assessment techniques and tools to meet individual needs.



4 | INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN & YOUTH

Recognizes the importance of relationships and communication in quality practice. Implements guidance techniques and strategies to support children and youth in their development.



5 | YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Acts in partnership with children and youth to foster appropriate child and youth leadership and voice.



6 | CULTURAL COMPETENCY & RESPONSIVENESS

Actively promotes respect for cultural diversity and creates an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful environment that embraces diversity.



7 | FAMILY, SCHOOL, & COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

Builds on respectful, reciprocal relationships across settings to promote optimal development for kids and families and to enhance quality.



8 | SAFETY & WELLNESS

Ensures the safety and wellness of children and youth by implementing prevention, preparedness, and health and safety practices.



9 | PROGRAM PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Supports staff in their development. Models healthy relationships, developmentally appropriate practice, and resource acquisition and use.



10 | PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & LEADERSHIP

Acts ethically, is committed to continuous learning, and advocates for best practices and policies for children and youth.

Being intentional about SEL requires the attention of both leaders and staff. The guide includes eight field-tested, research and evidence-based practices for promoting SEL, with the most foundational organizational practices followed by programmatic practices (see Figure 2, below).

The section for each practice identifies who should be involved and is supported by the rationale, the aligned NAA CKCs content areas, and a sample of practical and actionable strategies. The who, why, and how are all included.

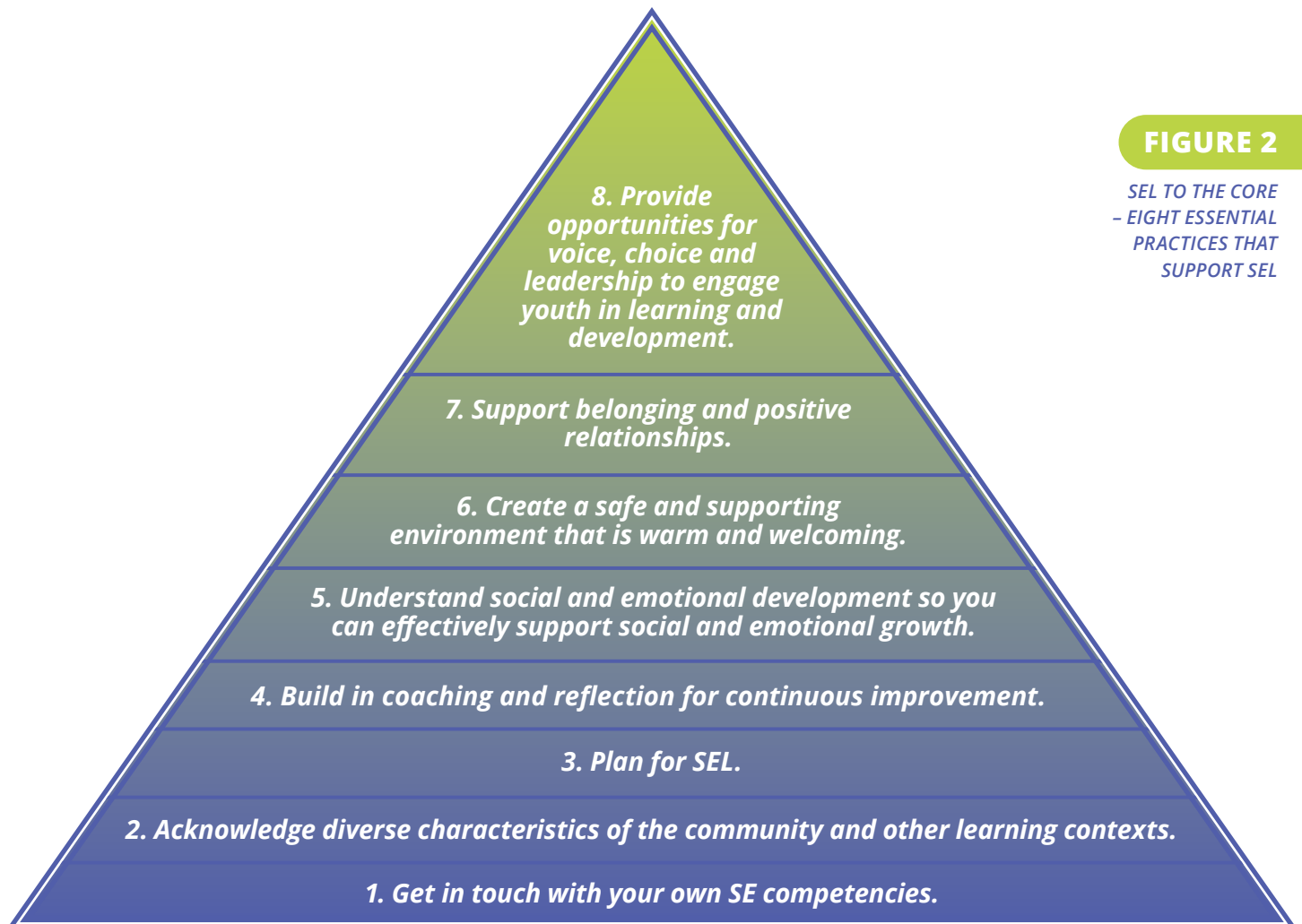


FIGURE 2

*SEL TO THE CORE
– EIGHT ESSENTIAL
PRACTICES THAT
SUPPORT SEL*

Why approach SEL practice this way? Because quality SEL is grounded in strong youth development.

START by getting grounded in youth development.

HOW: Become familiar with the NAA CKCs, available with self-assessment tools and free online training at naaweb.org/resources/core-competencies.

NOTE: SEL to the Core is designed for afterschool professionals and leaders who want to facilitate social and emotional learning intentionally. The rest of this guide builds on—and thus assumes—a solid understanding of and commitment to effective youth development practice.

See page 13 for the NAA CKCs Content Areas and SEL Practices Crosswalk.



GET IN TOUCH with Your Own Social and Emotional Competencies

one

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: SEL begins with the adults. It is essential that staff understand and develop their own social and emotional competencies because of their influence on the overall environment. To be intentional, adults must be self-aware and work toward their own improvement, yet those efforts toward progress should not and cannot halt work with young people.

Adult social and emotional competencies and well-being are related to healthy relationships, effective program management, and the effective implementation of SEL. Relatedly, adult stress and burnout plays a role in their social and emotional competence. Working with youth can be an incredibly rewarding, albeit stressful job with many demands. Adults who are overly stressed may not be able to connect with youth or effectively promote social-emotional practice. To facilitate the most positive experiences for youth, it's important to remember the social and emotional health of adults working with them and on their behalf.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS: All of them! Adult social and emotional competence is foundational. This first practice is aligned with all 10 NAA CKCs content areas.



HOW:

- » Support adult social and emotional competence by building in **training** to develop knowledge of social and emotional competencies and the self-awareness necessary for this developmental journey. Emotional intelligence trainings, mindfulness-based professional development programs, and culturally responsive practice trainings have all been shown to increase adult social-emotional competence and cultural awareness. Leaders should provide staff with training in evidence-based approaches and ensure resources such as time and materials are available. Making training opportunities available enables staff to support each other, while learning and during implementation.
- » Adopt a **culture of coaching and feedback** that supports everyone's social and emotional development.

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Contextually relevant and culturally competent practice means SEL will—and should—look different for each person. Cultural values and identity are directly connected to SEL. The relationship between cultural values and these types of skills is complex, as cultural values often influence which social and emotional skills are most important for individual youth (Walker, Olson, & Herman, 2017).

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS: All of them! It is necessary to ensure all youth development and SEL practice is contextually relevant and culturally competent. *NAA CKCs* content area 6 specifically highlights cultural competency and responsiveness.



HOW:

- » To better understand the community and the learning context, **make an asset map or conduct a needs assessment.** Find out what youth, families, and community members need from a program that supports growth and development.
- » Have **open-ended staff discussions about cultural competence.** Ask:
 - *How do we function as a staff community? What is our program culture?*
 - *How can we support young people's cultural values and skills?*
 - *What are the strengths of our program? What is missing?*
 - *How can we use culture to strengthen our program?*
 - *What would it look like if we were welcoming to all youth, families and cultures?*
- » **Engage with families and community members in a way that reflects their values, acknowledges their lived experiences and works for them.** Foster relationships by building on mutual understanding and cultivating trust. To do so, forge bonds and understand their lived experiences. Culturally competent practices start with a foundation of (1) recognizing one's own cultural biases, (2) knowledge of youth cultural backgrounds, (3) awareness of the broader social, economic, and political context, (4) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies, and (5) a commitment to building caring communities.

ENGAGE WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN A WAY THAT REFLECTS THEIR VALUES, ACKNOWLEDGES THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES AND WORKS FOR THEM.

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: While there are many ways to engage in SEL, intentionality and planning are key. SEL does not happen by accident. Prioritize SEL. Intentionally integrate it into daily practice. Ensure the organizational and program climate and culture are supportive of social and emotional growth and development.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

2: Learning Environments and Curriculum

3: Child/Youth Observation & Assessment

9: Program Planning & Development

10: Professional Development & Leadership



HOW:

- » **Focus time (and energy) on supporting social and emotional development.** SEL doesn't have to be—nor should it be—an add-on or something that detracts from other things. Though integration can be an effective method, ensure there is a level of intentionality to the SEL practice.
- » Make sure **SEL efforts are aligned with program, school, and community strategies, resources, and goals.** Consider meeting with the school principal and engaging stakeholders from other community initiatives to determine whether and how the program could support social and emotional development. Many districts, schools, and afterschool programs have goals that focus on and endeavors that align their SEL efforts, yet these efforts may not fully succeed as educators might use different language and operate within separate initiatives. Finding common ground and operationalizing alignment is critical (Partnership for Children and Youth, 2017).
- » **Adopt an approach, framework, program, or curriculum.** Plan for implementation or plan to identify teachable moments, such as those that might occur during program time, and determine strategies for capitalizing on those moments—supporting competence-building as it happens.
- » Ensure **appropriate time and resources are available for continuous staff development.** Providing training, integrating SEL-topics into staff meetings and providing resource materials for staff are critical supports.



WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Effective coaching considers the humanness of program staff and creates safe spaces for adults to try new practices and reflect on their practices to determine for themselves what to do differently (Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

2: Learning Environments and Curriculum

4: Interactions with Children & Youth

9: Program Planning & Development

3: Child/Youth Observation & Assessment

5: Youth Engagement

10: Professional Development & Leadership



HOW:

- » Engage staff in **ongoing coaching**. The coach can be a supervisor, a peer or someone with specific knowledge to share. The coach should observe program and practice based on an agreed-upon focus. They should also observe youth-adult interactions, taking as many notes as possible, then plan time to review the notes and debrief using a coaching conversation tool. During the debrief, coaches should ask:
 - *Objective questions about directly observable data.*
 - *Reflective questions about reactions to the debrief.*
 - *Interpretive questions about creating meaning from the observable data.*
 - *Decisional questions about what to do next.*
- » **Provide staff time to reflect on their own social and emotional competence and practices.** Set goals and incorporate use of a self-reflection tool into daily programming. Develop individual and group action plans to work toward goals.
- » **Begin program activities by identifying or sharing goals.** Provide opportunities for youth to share what they have done or learned and encourage others to give feedback.
- » **Strive to help youth make connections between personal and program goals,** to see the alignment between the two.
- » **Engage youth in reflection,** which may happen in two ways: Routine reflection occurs at the end of a day or activity, while culminating reflection occurs at the end of a longer process.
 - *Pair-share with a peer to discuss something you learned.*
 - *Plus/Delta: Describes what worked well—plus—and what needs improvement—delta.*
 - *Apples and onions: Describe something sweet—apples—and something stinky—onions—that occurred during the activity.*
 - *Engage in a presentation or performance. (Culminating)*
 - *Create something tangible and discuss the process for creation. (Culminating)*
- » **Collect information in an ongoing manner and use it to drive decisions.** Include multiple stakeholders in data collection efforts—youth, families, program staff—and strive for various methods of data collection. Program observations, surveys, focus groups and administrative data can all inform continuous improvement efforts.

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Practices that promote building social and emotional competencies should be developmentally appropriate. Understanding which competencies are possible, appropriate for and relevant to the young people you work with is a critical first step in supporting SEL.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

- 1: Child & Youth Growth & Development
- 3: Child/Youth Observation & Assessment
- 5: Youth Engagement

- 2: Learning Environments and Curriculum
- 4: Interactions with Children & Youth
- 6: Cultural Competency & Responsiveness



HOW:

- » **Scaffold activities, providing just the right amount of support.** For example: When working with younger youth, focus on regulation, emotional processes, and social and interpersonal skills using a more didactic/instructional approach; older youth may need a more hands-on and interactive approach to skill-development (Jones et al., 2017).
- » **Sequence each activity with a clear and logical flow.** For a sequenced learning experience, take time to think through the skills needed and teach those skills first. Plan activities to build upon each other over the course of the program cycle.
- » **Develop activities that may be done in multiple ways** to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of all youth.
- » **Design activities and plan programming that is active and engaging.** Activities should be interactive and hands-on.
- » **Focus time** on competence development and explicitly target attitudes, beliefs, and skills.
- » **Embed competence-building into everyday practice.** Capitalize on teachable moments and recognize when young people demonstrate social and emotional skills effectively. Name emotions as they arise and discuss decision-making cause and effect. Engage in a process of modeling skills for youth, encouraging them to practice, providing feedback and ongoing coaching in the moment.
- » **Ensure programming is balanced** and competence-building activities extend over multiple sessions, with tangible outcomes (such as products and skills) that are meant to be shared with a variety of audiences.

ENGAGE IN A PROCESS OF MODELING SKILLS FOR YOUTH...

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Creating a physically and psychologically safe space—where youth are safe from violence, bullying, harassment and substance use—is essential to SEL. Only when young people feel safe and secure will they have the capacity to develop social and emotional skills.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

2: Learning Environments and Curriculum

5: Youth Engagement

7: Family, School & Community Relationships

10: Professional Development & Leadership

4: Interactions with Children & Youth

6: Cultural Competency & Responsiveness

8: Safety & Wellness



HOW:

- » **Develop and implement policies that promote and ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all youth.**
- » **Remember: Safety extends beyond the physical program space.** Consider how youth get to and from the program and establish a plan to ensure safety during transitions.
- » **Greet and call youth by name.** Position yourself so you can greet young people at the beginning of the session. Using their names is validation that they exist, are unique and are important.
- » **Make eye contact.** Use positive body language to let youth know you care and are interested in them.
- » **Get to know them.** Engage in brief conversation with at least a few different youth each day, making sure to connect with all each week. What are their names, interests and strengths? Where do they need support? What are their favorite colors, sports, hobbies, foods? Learning more about youth demonstrates that there is an adult who cares about them and enables staff to develop activities and programming that meets their needs.
- » **Nurture developing relationships to sustain them.** Check in with youth regularly, even informally, to let them know you care about them and about what happens in their lives.
- » **Check in at the start of an activity.** Ask youth how their day is going and to respond with a show of hands: thumbs up, thumbs down or in the middle. Observe their response—or if some youth don't respond. Use this to inform the day's approach.

**LEARNING MORE ABOUT YOUTH
DEMONSTRATES THAT THERE IS AN ADULT
WHO CARES ABOUT THEM...**

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Consider the many relationship types youth experience and observe during program, including the youth-staff duo, peer relationships, and relationships staff have with one another. It is crucial that staff support young people and each other.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

2: Learning Environments and Curriculum

5: Youth Engagement

7: Family, School & Community Relationships

4: Interactions with Children and Youth

6: Cultural Competency and Responsiveness



HOW:

- » **Staff language** is critical to developing positive relationships as young people learn from it (modeling) and make judgments about whether and how they can and will engage, based on what they hear. A warm tone of voice and respectful language are critical to support belonging and relationship-building.
- » **Learn more about young people** and use that knowledge to guide activities and program planning. This approach promotes youth engagement and fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- » **Ask open-ended questions** and practice active listening by following up with questions that reflect what has been said and heard and show an interest in learning more. This demonstrates engaged and effective communication. Encourage youth to engage in similar discussions with each other.
- » **Consider the adult relationships to which youth are exposed.** Model positive relationships at all times, through language, nonverbal and body language, and actions.
- » **Use group work and discussions.** These strategies are critical for developing key social and emotional competencies such as active listening, effective communication, and collaboration. After each group activity, encourage youth to participate in discussion, reflecting on their group process—what worked, what didn't and strategies for the next group activity.
- » **Identify seemingly innocuous practices that may unintentionally promote exclusion and restructure them to promote inclusion.** An example is creating groups or teams. A situation where two team captains select teammates may make youth feel excluded, if they were not picked first or were picked last. Instead, use strategies that encourage sharing and bonding. Offer a question, such as, "Would you rather eat tacos or pizza?" Divide the youth into groups, based on the response. (*Bonus: This enables youth to get to know each other better and bond over shared interests.*)
- » **Empower young people and let them know you are their champion.** Offer authentic and specific praise and recognition, and make sure they know that they matter.
- » **Co-create group values** to promote positive behavior:
 - Pre-select words that describe values (*honesty, kindness*) and print or write them on individual sheets of paper.
 - Divide youth into small groups. Have each group select the five values that mean the most to them.
 - Each group should eliminate three words, so only two remain.
 - Each group should then select one word.

- *Bring everyone back together to discuss their process, the word they selected and what they mean as a larger group.*
- *Create a word cloud with the final words selected.*

- » **Support belonging through a friendship or buddy bench:** A friendship or buddy bench is a special place for youth to sit when they want or need to talk with someone. This bench is often visually different and more appealing than other seating around the school; youth might paint the bench in a variety of fun and welcoming colors. The bench is often placed in a noticeable area during school and program time, to be used at any time, for any reason. The purpose is clear: When youth need to talk, they should take a seat and a peer will join them. If youth see someone sitting, they should recognize their need to talk and join them to lend an ear.

eight

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES for Voice, Choice & Leadership to Engage Youth in Learning & Development

WHO: Leadership and Staff

WHY: Providing youth opportunities to share their voices and make decisions serves multiple purposes. First, hearing from young people helps improve the program, ensuring that programming reflects their experience, wants and needs. Second, when youth share their voices and see change, they begin to learn their voices have value. Third, youth learn the critical skill of decision-making when given opportunities to make choices; they see the reality of cause and effect.

APPLICABLE NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS:

2: Learning Environments and Curriculum

4: Interactions with Children and Youth

5: Youth Engagement



HOW:

- » **Create a program youth council or board.** Engage youth of different ages in developmentally appropriate ways, while ensuring the group has representation of all youth served. Ask youth council members how they can best support the program. Young people have great ideas about activities to offer, ways to engage the community, and how to best support their peers' growth and development.
- » **Administer surveys and conduct focus groups with youth.** Adopt an open-door policy and ensure youth feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with program staff.
- » **Have youth help plan activities and programming and ensure there are multiple choices.** Make certain the choices are developmentally appropriate and authentic. Discuss choices and their impact.
- » **Design activities so youth have opportunities to lead, follow and be responsible.** Discuss and teach these skills and encourage reflection on the opportunities.
- » **Encourage youth to mentor others.** Older youth may pair with younger youth, more skilled youth may support peers who are novice, and random pairings may promote the development of new relationships.

NAA CKCs CONTENT AREAS & SEL PRACTICES

CROSSWALK

NAA CORE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCY CONTENT AREAS

PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE SEL	1. CHILD/YOUTH GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT	2. LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND CURRICULUM	3. CHILD/YOUTH OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT	4. INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH	5. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT	6. CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND RESPONSIVENESS	7. FAMILY, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS	8. SAFETY AND WELLNESS	9. PROGRAM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT	10. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP
GET IN TOUCH with Your Own SE Competencies	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
ACKNOWLEDGE Diverse Characteristics of the Community & Other Learning Contexts	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
PLAN for SEL		★	★						★	★
BUILD in Coaching & Reflection for Continuous Improvement		★	★		★				★	★
UNDERSTAND Social & Emotional Development So You Can Effectively Support Social & Emotional Growth	★	★	★	★	★	★				
CREATE a Safe & Supportive Environment That is Warm & Welcoming		★		★	★	★	★	★		★
SUPPORT Belonging & Positive Relationships		★		★	★	★	★			
PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES for Voice, Choice & Leadership to Engage Youth in Learning & Development		★		★	★					

SEL to the CORE: methods



The search process for research- and field-based resources referenced in this guide began with a scan of the field, including peer-reviewed and published literature as well as “grey literature” emphasizing social and emotional competence and the specific and actionable practices that promote social and emotional learning and development. Additional sources were reviewed based on recommendations from experts in the field. The resource base was expanded by searching for additional resources using relevant terms in search engines such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO, JSTOR and ERIC. Sources were chosen for review based on recent publication dates and the content of the resource; namely, that practices to support SEL were the resource focus. Once resources were selected, the AIR team reviewed the materials to identify the SEL practices. Next, the team synthesized practices across resources to determine commonalities and synergies. Finally, the team completed a comprehensive crosswalk of the practices with the NAA CKCs content areas, identified logical connections, and developed strategies to support implementation of each practice.

The search process for this guide was designed to be comprehensive; however, the knowledge base is rich, diverse, and ever-changing, and any search process has limitations. As such, the included resources represent an effort to provide a range of practices. The exclusion of any given source is not intended to imply its lack of value to the field. Similarly, the inclusion of a source does not represent any evaluation of its methodologies or findings.

RESOURCES SELECTED FOR REVIEW AND INCLUSION IN THIS GUIDE

Competencies

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Practices

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