



# Promoting a healthy school environment via social-emotional learning in the high school setting: An overview

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## Abstract

**Cite this paper as:** Tusha A, Bulut S, Al—Hendawi M. Promoting a healthy school environment via social-emotional learning in the high school setting: An overview. *Adv Med Psychol Public Health*. 2024;1(3):156-163.

Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.10900979

Received: 5 November 2023  
Revised: 15 January 2024  
Accepted: 30 March 2024

Adolescence is a period of incredible growth, discovery, and possibility. Nevertheless, it is also a stage when behavioral and physiological issues can arise or intensify, with long-term adverse effects up to adulthood. The target audience consists of high school students, educators, school administrators, and families since adolescents at this stage find it challenging to discover and maintain their identity. Consequently, if adolescents do not adequately develop their social-emotional skills up to high school or are challenged by their environment, the chance of becoming disobedient, troublesome, low-performers, and so on arises. Fostering social-emotional learning promotes a safe and positive educational atmosphere in which all adolescents are encouraged to speak out, embrace difficulties, take risks, and strive for success. Nowadays, social-emotional learning remains one of the most practical frameworks used in schools, boosting self-awareness, academic success, and positive behaviors both in and out of the classroom.

**Take-home message:** Embracing Social-Emotional Learning in high schools is pivotal for nurturing adolescents' holistic development, enhancing their academic success, emotional well-being, and social skills while creating a supportive and inclusive educational environment.

**Keywords:** adolescence; disruptive behaviour, high school; social-emotional learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout high school, students contend with academic challenges, peer pressure, and personal development, emphasizing the importance of fostering an educational environment that addresses both academic accomplishments and the social-emotional welfare of students. Historically, families and institutions such as religions were held liable for training children and teenagers to cope with diverse life events, such as ethics, emotional management, and social skills. The narrative of social-emotional learning (hereafter referred to as SEL) can be traced back to the earliest teacher-student relationships, linking its roots to the shared responsibilities of families and institutions. With the rapid societal transformations witnessed in recent decades, coupled with specific challenges such as evolving employment landscapes and the dynamics of romantic relationships, SEL has gained heightened significance in the lives of contemporary youth.

Adolescence, in particular, is a period of immense growth, learning, discovery, and opportunity throughout which youngsters acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them thrive in life. According to Piaget [1], this is a stage when an organized whole begins to emerge, and individuals begin to recognize connections between and among concepts, as well as the manipulation of formulas [2]. Consequently, during this phase often characterized by an "identity crisis," adolescents may display a spectrum of undesirable behaviours, ranging from inappropriate speech to acts of violence. Additionally, the onset of pubertal development brings about hormonal fluctuations, including increases in testosterone, estradiol, cortisol, oxytocin, and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) levels [3]. These bodily changes can manifest disruptive behaviors such as calling out, disturbances, non-compliance, aggression, and property destruction serve as demonstrative instances of disruptive conduct [4]. Principally, disruptive behaviors can be defined as any conduct that interferes with the

teaching and learning process, impeding the smooth flow of educational activities. In this context, a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between cognitive development, identity formation, and hormonal changes becomes imperative for comprehending and addressing the diverse behaviors exhibited by teenagers during this crucial formative period.

Furthermore, multiple studies have found improper behaviors, even for teachers, are hard to manage [5]. As a result, according to Guinness et al. [6], when students engage in unacceptable behavior, it not only hampers individual students' access to academic learning but also affects their peers adversely. This notion is supported by a meta-analysis featured in the journal *Psychology in the Schools* in 2012, revealing positive outcomes for students participating in social [7]. It also protects against psychological issues, loneliness, stress, and disappointment. Therefore, many European countries, including Italy, Latvia, Romania, Croatia, Greece, and Portugal, are implementing SEL in their classrooms to better prepare their youngsters for the rigors of modern life [8]. The demand for integrating SEL into education, even within emergencies, gained momentum during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis disrupted education globally, impacting children's access to learning and hindering opportunities for relationship-building and social connection with peers and teachers [9]. Consequently, SEL has become a worldwide phenomenon and an essential component of educational systems for what students should understand and be capable of doing at various stages of human growth.

This narrative literature review article aims to explore and synthesize the existing body of research on the role and impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) in high school environments.

By examining the historical background, prevalence, and positive effects of SEL, this article aims to highlight its significance in addressing adolescent behavioral and emotional challenges. The review delves into various aspects, including the correlation between SEL and school climate, teachers' responses to disruptive behaviors, and effective intervention strategies. The paper aims to demonstrate the broader implications of SEL beyond school settings, emphasizing its role in fostering overall well-being, academic success, and community engagement among adolescents.

The goal is to provide educators, administrators, and policymakers with comprehensive insights into the benefits of implementing SEL programs and the necessity of integrating these practices into the educational system for the holistic development of high school students.

## **METHODS**

### ***Review procedure***

This narrative literature review was conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the high school environment. An extensive bibliographic investigation was conducted to gather and analyze relevant studies in this field.

### ***Search strategy***

The literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "Social-Emotional Learning," "high school education," "adolescent development," and "school environment" were used in various combinations to ensure a wide range of relevant articles were identified.

### ***Selection criteria***

Studies selected for review included those that specifically focused on SEL in high school settings, its impact on adolescent development, and its implementation in educational environments. Both empirical studies and theoretical articles were considered. The timeframe for the literature was primarily from 2000 to the present to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives and findings.

### ***Data extraction and synthesis***

Data from the selected studies were extracted and synthesized to highlight key themes and findings related to SEL in high schools. This included examining the effectiveness of SEL programs, their impact on students' academic and emotional outcomes, and strategies for successful implementation in school curricula.

### ***Narrative approach***

Consistent with the nature of a narrative review, this paper synthesizes the literature to provide a broad understanding of the topic. The review is structured to present the historical background of SEL, followed by discussions on its prevalence, the importance of school climate, teachers' reactions to disruptive behaviors, interventions, and positive effects of SEL.

### ***Quality assessment***

While a narrative review does not typically involve a formal quality assessment of studies, efforts were made to select sources from reputable journals and authors, ensuring the reliability and credibility of the information presented.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The historical background of SEL***

Until recently, in the West, the academy did not place a high priority on socio-emotional skills. In contrast, SEL, initially conceived as an educational initiative in the context of American progressive education, has evolved into a prominent and extensively debated subject in American general education. Influential figures in progressive education, including Edward

Thorndike and John Dewey, along with academic institutions such as Columbia University Teachers College and Yale University, were deeply immersed in SEL education during the early twentieth century [10]. Consequently, these pioneers and collaborators in the field of SEL successfully formulated initial programs with a primary focus on socio-emotional learning. Examples of such programs include Marc Tucker's exemplary program endorsed by Bill Clinton, Roger Weissberg's K–12 New Haven Social Development Program, and Timothy Shriver's Outcome-Based Education [11].

Moreover, Daniel Goleman, the vanguard of emotional intelligence, focused on recognizing intelligence as a predictor of future success. The surge in interest regarding SEL can be traced back to the publication of Goleman's seminal work, "Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ for character, health, and lifelong achievement," in 1995. In response to Goleman's comprehensive studies on emotional intelligence, a dedicated coalition of interdisciplinary professionals, encompassing educators, researchers, practitioners, and child advocates, collaborated to establish "The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning" (CASEL) educational program in 1997. CASEL's initial objective was to enhance educational accessibility by addressing all children's social and emotional needs. Consequently, the terms CASEL and SEL were concurrently coined, marking a pivotal moment in conceptualizing and implementing socio-emotional education [12]. Thus, CASEL, a prominent institution in the realm of social-emotional learning practice and research, characterizes SEL as "the process by which individuals, both children and adults, acquire and proficiently apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential for comprehending and managing emotions; establishing and attaining positive objectives; experiencing and expressing empathy towards others; cultivating and sustaining positive relationships; and making judicious decisions."

### ***Prevalence and data for SEL***

Sebastian et al. [13] describe how puberty, which marks the start of adolescence, triggers changes in brain structure and hormone activity that can make relatively minor social challenges, such as peer rejection, immensely painful and difficult to deal with. Hence, adolescent students attempt to deal with new demands in school and social life, often accompanied by unexplored and intense emotions. Furthermore, teenagers believe they can easily endure and cope with these challenges without adult supervision. According to a report by UNESCO in 2023, more than 30% of students worldwide have been subjected to bullying, resulting in noteworthy and immediate effects on their academic performance, school retention, and both short-term and long-term physical and mental health [14].

A rigorous study compilation demonstrated that SEL programs, encompassing curricula and other meticulously documented strategies, can enhance young individuals' social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievements [15]. Consequently, adolescents can benefit from SEL by obtaining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to become interested, responsible, and engaged citizens capable of meeting long-term complex demands [15]. That's why enhancing social-emotional skills can aid adolescents in assembling safer student learning environments and becoming virtuous residents. According to Patel, students who feel safe in their educational environments are more likely to study, prosper, and grow academically, emotionally, and socially. As a necessity, we must ensure that students communicate constructively and learn in a confidential environment [16].

The incidence and forms of improper conduct in educational settings vary between schools, countries, and investigative sorts. In Kenya, for example, violent conduct displayed by teenagers, such as bullying, was more prevalent in schools than fighting and vandalism of school property [17]. In 2011, it was concluded that the incidence of behavioral and emotional issues in teenagers was 30 % in Chandigarh, India, with girls outnumbering boys in all age groups [18]. In the short term, interventions that involve the families of adolescents with Disruptive Behavior Disorders (DBD) prove both effective and acceptable [19]. Henceforward, SEL programs aspire to enhance skills and attitudes in adolescents to improve their abilities and attitudes needed to help them manage more successfully with their challenges and establish compliant school settings that adolescents want to be a part of by modifying the school environment [20]. Studies indicate that schools are not widely implementing effective SEL programs [21].

### ***School climate and disruptive behaviors***

Various studies suggest that warm classroom environments and positive teacher-student interactions facilitate academic learning and social and emotional skills [22]. School climate and SEL have a bidirectional relationship. School safety is regarded as an umbrella concept for various internal risks in a school setting, including any sort of abuse, such as bullying, violence, psychosocial disorders, and many disasters, to ensure the overall well-being of its members [23]. Thus, the school environment or atmosphere may be characterized as a distinct set of intellectual, behavioral, social, ethical, and physical aspects that influence academic achievement and students' basic safety requirements [24]. Disruptive behavior can have long-term effects on adolescents since it is linked to low life satisfaction, smoking onset, a lack of social support, hopefulness, stress, and depression [25]. Udoh et al. [26] further categorize adolescent school-related improper behavior, shedding light on reasons such as seeking attention, escaping dislikes, and finding pleasure in disruptive actions [2]. So, the key to understanding the school environment is to identify underlying problems and enhance socio-emotional skills.

In particular, teachers play an essential part in promoting SEL at school since they must accept specific programs by incorporating SEL into the regular curriculum, which in some cases may be complicated. Teachers, for example, generally integrate specific programs in classroom instruction, though they struggle to incorporate SEL into the standard curriculum [23]. For instance, classrooms with warm teacher-child interactions facilitate deep learning and positive social and emotional growth among students. Including the most recent studies, various SEL programs boost educators' SEL competencies by offering experience in dealing with conflict [7]. However, educational staff should be forewarned that SEL programs, as Fagan et al. [21] noted, are not instantaneously transformational solutions with substantial immediate impacts on youth. Improving the comprehensive school environment necessitates evaluating and modifying policies and practices that might adversely affect or isolate students. The objective is to advocate for health equity within the educational context. A positive school climate is closely linked to a sound psychosocial environment, facilitating positive connections and interactions among students, adults, and peers [27].

### ***Teachers' reactions to disruptive behaviors***

Establishing an orderly and conducive classroom environment is crucial for effective teaching. However, the influence of individual student characteristics on managing the classroom remains not fully understood. Traditionally, various punitive methodologies, as outlined by Ijaiya, such as making an offender stand up, sending them back for arriving late, suspension, yard duty, or yelling, tend to reinforce and perpetuate aggressive behaviors as a means of discipline [28]. Instead, it is recommended to employ behavior modification techniques like modeling, token economy, praising, and performance contracts. Enhancing proper conduct is vital to reducing inappropriate behavior in school [6]. Therefore, the initial step towards curbing disruptive conduct involves fostering positive behavior.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Support (PBIS) is an example of a proactive approach used in schools to promote school safety and cultivate positive behavior without relying on punishment. School-wide PBIS operates as a flexible, evidence-based framework with multiple tiers to enhance education by addressing social, emotional, and behavioral aspects [6]. Furthermore, one of the concluding phases in the first tier of PBIS involves implementing SEL, which aims to boost students' socio-emotional skills by dedicating time throughout the instructional day to actively educate them. Research indicates that SEL skills contribute to positive development, reducing disruptive behavior and enhancing academic success, citizenship, and overall well-being [29-32]. In tandem, these findings and additional research support the implementation of a thorough and proactive intervention strategy. This approach should prioritize fostering positive behavior and socio-emotional development, aligning with the educational landscape.

### ***Interventions***

Numerous intervention programs and games aim to enhance social-emotional skills, such as the "Strong Kids and Strong Teens" SEL programs [33], SAFE [34], the "Aislados" Intervention Program in Adolescents [35], and "Promoting Positive Behavior Using the Good Behavior Game" [36], among others. Despite the availability of various interventions, CASEL, or SEL, stands out as a leading force in social-emotional learning [37]. Specifically, SEL proves to be an effective methodology for preventing emotional and behavioral disorders in children and adolescents. Moreover, SEL contributes to reducing teachers' stress levels by mitigating students' inappropriate behaviors, which often serve as the underlying cause of teacher stress and fostering improved student-teacher relationships. Thus, students acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills by learning to identify and control emotions, create and attain goals, understand others from different backgrounds, form meaningful relationships, and make responsible decisions [38]. SEL comprises five basic competencies: *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making* [11].

Besides, Weissberg and O'Brien [39] describe *self-awareness* as "the capacity to identify and recognize emotions, strengths, limits, needs, values, and how these affect one's behavior and self-worth." The capacity to successfully manage and regulate emotions and actions to control desires, self-motivation, self-discipline, build organizational skills, and work toward personal objectives is referred to as *self-management* [10]. *Social awareness* refers to developing empathy, acknowledging individual differences, and respecting others [40]. By working together through active listening, consensus, rejection, conflict management, and help-seeking, the *relationship skills* component tries to preserve healthy and rewarding communication, social engagement, and relationship development [39]. *Responsible decision-making* is defined as the capacity to identify and solve problems, realistically evaluate outcomes based on ethical standards and societal norms, use decision-making skills with safety precautions, and respect and value the well-being of others [41]. Nevertheless, as Hassani and Schwab point out, effective tactics utilized in teachers' day-to-day practice can impact a student population most [42]. So, all of the above-mentioned components of SEL are highly recommended to be applied without any exclusion.

### ***Positive effects of SEL***

In the research conducted by Cipriano et al. [43], students engaged in SEL programs demonstrated enhanced academic, school, and social-emotional outcomes. These initiatives fostered a more positive school environment, reduced anxiety, stress, and depression, and improved connections with peers and teachers. Moreover, SEL initiatives have been shown to

enhance academic performance in young individuals [44,45]. Yeager (2017) also emphasizes that the SEL framework is pivotal in reinforcing teenagers' internal social and emotional well-being, subsequently impacting their functioning [45].

The five SEL factors are a fundamental framework for adolescents, offering a valuable foundation to address behavioral issues, alleviate emotional distress, and foster positive behaviors, as supported by Greenberg et al. [46]. As SEL endeavors to integrate emotion, cognition, communication, and behavior, the preference for a combined training approach by program designers, rather than isolating these skills, reflects a comprehensive strategy following Durlak et al. [33]. It is essential to recognize the diversity of SEL techniques, with Systemic SEL, as advocated by Mahoney et al. [47], emerging as a strategic initiative to create inclusive learning environments for students spanning Pre-K to Grade 12, emphasizing the development and application of social, emotional, and academic competencies.

Moreover, the robust scientific evidence presented by Bettge et al. [48], Stocker & Gallagher [49], Durlak et al. [44], and McLeod & Boyes [50] underscores the effectiveness of SEL programs in addressing psychological concerns, specifically in reducing depression, general anxiety, and stress. Additional studies, such as those conducted by Castillo et al. [51] and Pendry et al. [52], further contribute to understanding SEL's positive impact on enhancing social and emotional abilities. In summary, the collective evidence supports the multifaceted benefits of SEL programs in promoting holistic well-being and academic success among students.

### ***Beyond school settings***

The accruing evidence underscores the discernible advantages associated with the implementation of SEL programs, as substantiated by a plethora of studies indicating that adept social-emotional skills are conducive to enhanced educational outcomes, gainful employment, improved physical and mental well-being, and diminished proclivities towards drug misuse, antisocial behavior, and relational challenges [46]. Moreover, SEL manifests as a cost-effective 12-k educational intervention, proffering a commendable return on investment, wherein participants foresee heightened rates of high school and college graduation, along with diminished propensities towards criminality and reliance on public services [49]. Therefore, the imperative for a collaborative and supportive milieu among stakeholders, including state financiers, school administrators, educators, parents or families, peers, and the community is underscored. Consequently, cultivating effective school-family relationships emerges as a pivotal constituent of a proficient SEL framework for children, bearing in mind the considerable impact of parenting on the social and emotional development of progeny throughout their developmental trajectory [53].

Notwithstanding, as teenagers engage actively in their community, they can acquire empathy and cultural understanding through interacting with individuals of different backgrounds, ages, concerns, and interests. Contributing to the greater community, such as receiving mentoring from a caring adult, may help adolescents develop relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, which are core SEL elements. To a greater extent, teens aspire to imitate their peers since they share the same characteristics and status rather than role-modeling adults [54].

Active contribution to the larger community, including mentoring from caring adults, facilitates the development of essential relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making—core elements of SEL. So, peer support remains crucial in developing efficient social-emotional skills such as team building, collaboration, problem-solving strategies, and community service. These skills collectively enhance adolescent engagement in school and learning, contributing to the establishment of a positive identity. From this holistic perspective, broader community and peer interactions play pivotal roles in shaping the multifaceted social-emotional development of adolescents.

### **CONCLUSION**

Inappropriate behavior displayed during adolescence can remain challenging for adolescents, teachers, peers, families, and the community if immediate and appropriate intervention is not provided. As a solution, SEL's methodology assists students of all ages in better comprehending and fully experiencing their emotions and demonstrating empathy toward others. Hereby, SEL is one of the best approaches for assisting teenagers since the acquired behaviors are utilized to help them make positive and responsible decisions, establish frameworks to attain their objectives and form healthy relationships with others. Its significance extends beyond academic settings, permeating various aspects of an adolescent's life. It empowers them to navigate the complexities of their emotions, promoting self-awareness and emotional intelligence, which are foundational for personal growth. Adolescents who undergo SEL interventions often contribute positively to their communities, fostering a more empathetic and collaborative social environment. By emphasizing interpersonal skills, SEL helps develop a sense of community responsibility, encouraging adolescents to engage in civic activities and create a positive ripple effect that extends well beyond their immediate circles.

Ultimately, despite school settings, the effectiveness of SEL is dependent on other surroundings, such as family, peers, and community support, which should operate as a holistic system to better benefit adolescents. The positive impact of SEL is not confined to the individual; it radiates throughout the broader community. Therefore, SEL is necessary for students as it teaches them valuable life skills like understanding themselves, developing a positive self-image, taking responsibility for their actions, and forming relationships with others. In conclusion, the multifaceted benefits of SEL underscores its indispensability for adolescents, offering a foundation for academic success and essential life skills that promote emotional

well-being, responsible decision-making, and meaningful connections. The collaborative involvement of families, peers, and the community further amplifies the transformational impact of SEL, making it an integral component of holistic support for adolescents.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization: and ideas A.T., S.B.; methodology: AT, SB, formal analysis, A.T. investigation: A.T., S.B., M.AH.; resources: A.T, S.B; data curation: A.T. writing—original draft preparation: AT; writing—review and editing, SB, MAH; visualization: AT; supervision: SB, MAH; project administration: AT. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** None.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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