



**The RISE Institute**

# Socioemotional Development: the basics and implications

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## Introduction

We all want children to thrive. When parents, teachers, community leaders and policymakers are asked about the goals of education and upbringing, they all mention ideas, such as confident and happy individuals, good neighbors, productive and responsible workers, and engaged citizens. Undeniably, both children and adults must acquire the skills required to improve the quality of their lives and to achieve positive outcomes; with the present state of affairs, the world needs people who are committed to creating a better global society and a more sustainable planet. Abundant research has shown that to reach these goals, learning social and emotional skills is just as important as developing cognitive skills.

It has been well established that attaining positive life outcomes and better communities are related to the acquisition of positive social and emotional skills. These abilities allow people to enjoy more satisfactory lives, to be more active family members and neighbors, and to become more involved citizens (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Focusing only on academic skills contributes partially to human development (Heckman, 2017). After years of research, practice and policy, it has become evident that academic subjects are not the only factors important for ensuring students achieve success in school, life and work (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gulotta, 2015). As it has been stated by Nobel Prize-winning economist, Professor James Heckman, *“while important, cognitive abilities alone are not as powerful as the dynamic package of cognitive skills and social skills. In short, cognition and character drive education and life success, with the character development often times being the most important factor”* (Heckman, 2010).

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, public education's main goal has been to prepare children to join the workforce, emphasizing academic subjects and cognitive skills. Children were required to learn a trade and to develop specific skills at school through memorization and obedience, while families, communities and religious institutions were responsible for the social, emotional and ethical aspects of development (Nelsen, 2006) (Punset, 2010). However, this equation does not work well anymore. With more and more women around the world becoming employed and working full-time, traditional roles have changed. Families encounter greater social and economic pressures. *“Schools and communities are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. Children are exposed to a more complex world through the media and have unmediated access to information and social contacts”* (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Dealing effectively with all of these dimensions requires a new and differentiated set of socio-emotional skills.

Furthermore, with the automatization of production and the advent of the information economy, employers seek employees with a different set of skills. However, there is a mismatch between the skills required by the job market and the ones taught at school and in colleges. Skills such as writing, math, science and history/geography are not the most valued skills for employers anymore. They were ranked 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> respectively in a list of 20 skills (Garcia & Weiss, 2016) (Greenberg et al., 2017). Today, the marketplace is looking for people who are able to be creative, get along with others, work in groups, develop greater agency, solve abstract problems, and collaborate (Busso, Cristia, Hincapie, Messina, & Ripani, 2017).

Additionally, many children and adults do not know how to deal with their emotions, relations, and social pressures, and therefore, they negatively affect their physical and mental health. This is “the

most in-debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history” (Brown, 2015). Loneliness has become a serious issue, even a health epidemic in countries like the UK, where they just launched a ministry to tackle this problem. Loneliness is associated with early death, obesity and excessive drinking (Brown, 2018).

Hence, there is an increasing need for a more well-rounded and comprehensive education starting very early in life in order to support both parental work and children’s learning and proper development. Children need to learn how to identify and manage their emotions, and make responsible decisions concerning theirs and others’ health and wellbeing to have a fulfilling life as well as rewarding relationships.

On the other hand, the global society is increasingly facing various pressing social issues such as injustice, violence, poverty, discrimination and environmental deterioration, and yet many people neither feel responsible nor called to action when those problems do not touch them directly. “We are neurobiologically wired to take care of each other as a social species. When we feel hatred and fear, we engage in a process of dehumanization. The first stage of every act of global dehumanization is language and words. Every genocide in history started with a dehumanization campaign of a group of people, and that started with words” (Brown, 2018). Simple changes, like being aware of the words you use in social media messages, might have transcendental consequences. That’s why we need an education system where children learn to empathize with others, no matter their race, gender, political preference, geographical location, etc.

Although it is taken for granted that a good quality education can help develop citizens who are capable and mindful, which in turn improves their livelihoods and those of others around them, the Incheon Declaration makes clear that certain knowledge, skills and values promote sustainable development more than others (UNESCO, 2017). Violence could be prevented, and sustainable peace could be achieved in communities where its citizens have developed social and emotional skills, along the cognitive and academic abilities. “Learning to live together and in peace can only be achieved by a plan of action that is perfectly structured to lead the children and fills their minds with norms, values, concepts and behaviors towards the assumption of peace and the rejection of violence as an essential component of their personalities. And we have to do this when the personality of children is being formed, not later” (World Association of Early Childhood Educators, 2018). Undoubtedly, the goals of education and the roles of key actors like schools, families, and other institutions must change if we are really committed to ensure an appropriate and holistic development for every child. Furthermore, education does not only happen at schools, at home or in educational settings. Education occurs everywhere and at all times. Children and young people learn how to behave from their role models, sport stars, celebrities, media personalities, politicians, civic and religious leaders, and from all interactions they have in society, including those on social media.

Currently, some progress can be seen at various levels. At the global level, UNESCO’s Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 states that “*relevant learning outcomes must be well defined in cognitive and non-cognitive domains, and continually assessed as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Quality education includes the development of those skills, values, attitudes and knowledge that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions and respond to local and global challenges*” (UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, UNFPA, UNDP, UN Women and UNHCR, 2016).

At the national level, some countries are currently designing or implementing their own policies and programs to include social and emotional skills as part of the curriculum. For instance, in the United States, all states have already set social and emotional standards and there are also national policy achievements such as the Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Act (Weissberg et al., 2015). Nonetheless, even the countries with some level of advancement in social and emotional learning still have various goals to reach as well as challenges to overcome.

The purpose of our initiative is to elaborate on the concept of social and emotional development. This is an attempt to describe what social emotional skills are, why they are important, what is their impact on school and life success as well as collective wellbeing, how those skills are acquired, who are the key actors, and what are their roles in helping children develop more holistically.

## Part 1: What and why?

### Definitions

Presently, various models explain social and emotional development. Many authors use different terms, such as non-cognitive skills, character-building skills, social emotional learning, soft skills, socio-emotional abilities, behavioral skills, life skills, inter-personal, intra-personal skills, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Garcia & Weiss, 2016) (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Some authors use the terms 'non-cognitive skills' or 'non-cognitive development' while other authors do not consider them to be accurate. The difference between cognitive skills and social and emotional skills is not clear-cut because some of them are located in an overlapped field (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). For instance, Pamela Cantor, from Turnaround for Children, points out that at their organization, they do not use the terms non-cognitive and non-academic skills since some of these skills are merely cognitive, such as attention and memory; and they are academic because they are learned in academic environments (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). In all of these debates, it is important to keep in mind that both processes - cognitive development and social and emotional development - are intertwined.

Each model uses its own definitions and categorizations. According to Jones and Doolittle (2017), social and emotional learning (SEL) "involves children's ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others, and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship" (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Alternatively, Garcia and Weiss (2016) state that non-cognitive skills represent "patterns of thought, feelings and behavior..." which "allow us to succeed in our public lives, workplaces, homes, and other societal contexts and to contribute meaningfully to society." (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). On the other hand, "the term social and emotional learning was introduced by the Fetzer Group in 1994 as a conceptual framework to promote the social, emotional and academic competence of young people and to coordinate school-family-community programming to address those educational goals." (Weissberg et al., 2015). Despite all the distinctions, the different models have significant aspects in common.

To synthesize, social and emotional development refers to the cognitive and emotional skills that a person can learn and develop to behave in ways that benefit themselves and others, to achieve positive outcomes in their health, personal relationships (family, friends, neighbors, peers, etc.), and academic and occupational endeavors, and to contribute in a significant way to society.

### Skills

If the purpose of education is to form healthy, responsible, and self-fulfilled individuals and better societies, it is essential to know what skills children should learn. Several authors have focused their research on learning about these social and emotional abilities and their impact on children's life.

There are numerous social and emotional skills. After reviewing different models and programs, 57 skills were identified (shown in Table 1).

Table No 1

Academic confidence	Cooperation	Growth mindset	Responsible decision making
Accurate interpretation of others' behavior	Creativity	Motivation	Self-awareness
Affection	Critical thinking skills	Open communication	Self-control
Agency	Curiosity	Optimism	Self-efficacy
Attention	Effective navigation of social situations	Organization skills	Self-esteem
Belonging	Emotional health	Perseverance	Self-knowledge
Civil identity	Emotions management	Persistence	Self-management
Closeness	Empathy	Planning, organizing, setting goals	Self-regulation
Cognitive flexibility	Executive function	Positive interactions	Social awareness
Cognitive regulation	Focus	Problem solving skills	Social skills
Communication skills	Following directions	Purpose	Stress management
Community responsibility	Forward thinking behavior	Relationship skills	Teamwork
Consciousness	Good listening	Resilience	Tolerance
Constructive conflict resolution	Grit	Respect	Work ethic

From this table, it is evident that the abilities categorized as socio emotional skills cover a very wide range: from self-knowledge to community responsibility; from perseverance to teamwork; from concentration to creativity, and so on. Some of them are more related to the self, while others focus more on social relations; some have certain similar features, while others form a foundation upon which to build on other skills. Different authors have classified them into either groups or models. Some authors have developed frameworks including only skills whose impact has been scientifically proven. To have a broad overview of this situation, three of these frameworks or models of sets of skills are presented.

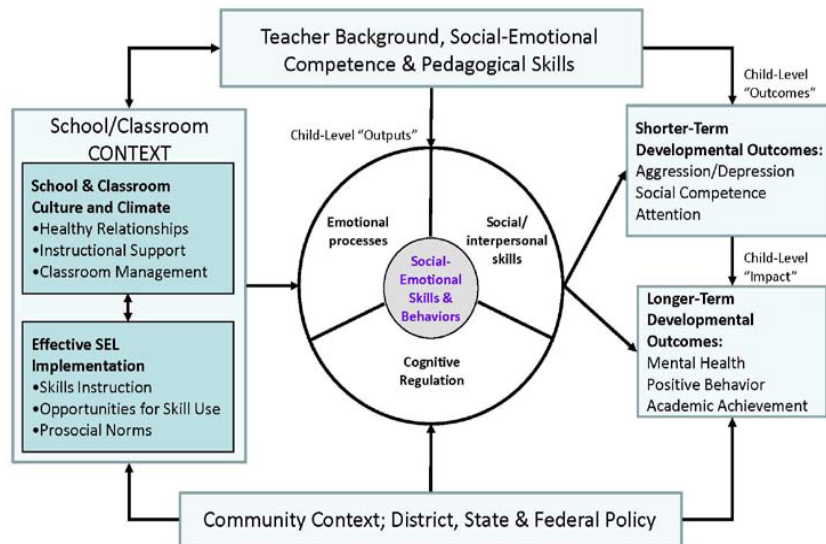
A well-known SEL scholar, Stephanie Jones and her colleagues, organizes social emotional skills and behaviors into three main groups: cognitive regulation, emotional processes and, social and interpersonal skills. In their classification, **cognitive regulation** refers to the abilities required to direct behavior toward a goal, for example when children need to use concentration, planning, problem-solving, and coordination skills, among others. According to this categorization, these skills are closely related to executive function skills, such as attention, inhibition, and working memory. They help to prioritize, sequence and inhibit behaviors, keep task-relevant information in mind, resist distractions, switch between task goals or even between different perspectives, use information to make decisions, and create abstract rules and handle novel situations (Jones, Barnes , Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017) (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

**Emotional processes** refer to emotional knowledge and include the ability to recognize, express, and regulate one's own emotions as well as being able to understand and empathize with the emotions

of others. These skills promote the identification of the causes and management of these emotions. These emotional skills are the basis for building positive social interactions. Additionally, without this emotional awareness, it's very difficult to maintain and focus attention (cognitive regulation) (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Building on emotional knowledge and processes, **social and interpersonal skills** include understanding social clues, interpreting correctly people's behavior, navigating social situations effectively, and interacting positively with others. According to Jones, "children who use these social and interpersonal processes effectively can collaborate, solve social problems, and coexist peacefully with others" (Jones , et al., 2017).

Figure 1 (Jones & Bouffard, 2012)



A different approach is proposed by CASEL, an organization that promotes integrated academic, social and emotional learning for all children, which classifies socio-emotional skills into five categories in its framework (shown in Figure 2):

- **Self-awareness:** the ability to identify one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and to understand how they guide behavior (including assessing one's strengths and limitations, positive mindsets, self-efficacy)
- **Self-management:** the ability to successfully regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, and to set and work toward goals (including delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, perseverance)
- **Social awareness:** the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, and to understand social and ethical norms for behavior



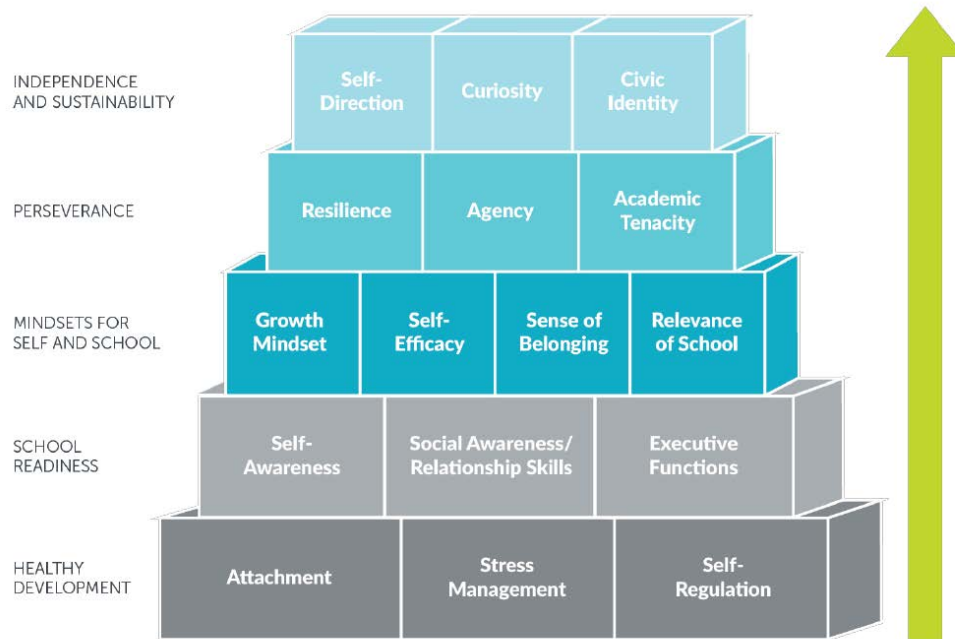
- **Relationship skills:** the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed (establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and to act in accordance with social norms)
- **Responsible decision-making:** the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms - evaluation of consequences of various actions, and to take the health and wellbeing of self and others into consideration (CASEL, 2013).

FIGURE 2 (CASEL, 2013)  
 Framework for systematic Social and Emotional Learning



Another framework, presented by Turnaround for Children, is Building Blocks for Learning, “a framework for comprehensive student development, grounded in science, in service of equity” (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). It supposes a developmental continuum starting in early childhood, acknowledges that every child has a different start in life, and represents a set of evidence-based skills and mindsets that facilitates success in academics, in social contexts and in life in general (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). This framework offers two new concepts: mindsets in addition to skills, and behavioral development in addition to social and emotional development. For Turnaround for Children, three criteria must be present in order for a skill to be included in their framework: it has to align to the child as a learner in an educational setting, it has to be a skill, behavior or mindset that is measurable, malleable and teachable, and there has to be research-based proof that the skill, behavior or mindset has an impact on academic achievement.

**Figure 3 (Stafford-Brizard, 2017)**  
**Building Blocks for Learning**



In this modular framework, the lowest row of skills or mindsets supports the development of those skills above, and so on to the top. The first row includes foundational skills required for healthy development: attachment, stress management, and self-regulation. Based on those skills, the second row involves skills, socio-emotional and cognitive, that support school readiness (self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and executive functions). According to this framework, the first and second row skills are prerequisites for effective learning at school and promote the mindsets presented in the third row (growth mindset, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance of school). Although these mindsets are located above skills in the second row, they might be developed before, after or at the same time.

The combination of these skills and mindsets helps to develop higher-order skills, like resilience, agency, and academic tenacity presented in the fourth row, required persevering and finishing school in spite of potential pitfalls and adversity. The fifth row represents higher-order skills and mindsets useful for children to plan their own course of life and pursue it with independence: self-direction, curiosity and civic identity (Stafford-Brizard, 2017).

These are only three of multiple frameworks created by scientists and experts to explain the importance of social and emotional skills. They present different forms of organizing and naming them, some overlap, some diverge, but despite their distinctions, all of them assume the magnitude of the effects they have in people's lives. Each framework presents a particular model to describe socio emotional learning, thus their multiplicity offers program planners, educators, and other professionals a substantial range of paradigms from where to select according to the context and the needs of each particular case. No matter which framework is used, it has been proven that the impacts social and emotional skills have on individuals and communities are so significant that it is imperative to teach them not only to children but also to adults. Social and emotional skills, as soft

as they can be perceived, are of enormous weight in the development of a person and in the creation of a peaceful and constructive society.

## Impact

Developing social and emotional skills yields both short- and long-term benefits. With good social and emotional development, people can achieve better outcomes in health, academic undertakings, employment, entrepreneurship, and relationships at family, community, and society levels. In their meta-analysis, Durlak and colleagues documented in 2011 that “SEL programs yielded significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school. They also enhanced students’ behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems, and improved academic performance on achievement tests and grades” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor , & Schellinger, 2011). When children acquire and use their social and emotional abilities, they tend to experience more meaning in their lives, succeed at school and higher education, develop their talents, have better income, be good family members, and become responsible and engaged citizens (Tough P. , 2012).

The first study to produce such findings is the well-known Perry Preschool Project, in the mid-1960s, a high-quality two-year preschool program for low-income children with low-IQ parents who were tracked for decades. Although the children presented gains in their IQ only in the short term, they showed no IQs benefits in the long run. However, the children’s behavior and social skills improved in the long-term: “Compared to the control group, the Perry students were more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to be employed at age twenty-seven, more likely to be earning more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year at age forty, less likely ever to have been arrested, and less likely to have spent time on welfare” (Tough P. , 2012). More recent studies have shown that employment and income are also positively related to socio-emotional development, such as having more successful careers, higher earnings and wages, job and financial security, employment stability, full-time jobs, increased productivity, and collegiality at work (Jones, Barnes , Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017).

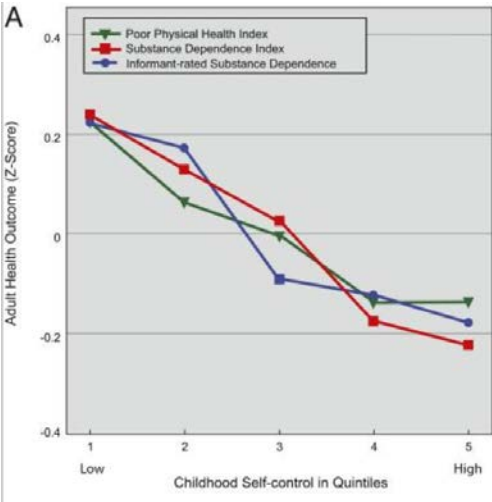
Moreover, social and emotional skills are related to positive academic outcomes: improved attitudes about school, better academic performance, engagement and achievement; increased participation in classroom activities, better classroom behavior, lower dropout rates, reduced years of special education, fewer repeated grades, and higher high school graduation rates, college readiness, entry and completion (Johnson & Wiener, 2017). Research has shown that when children can focus their attention well, manage negative emotions, navigate relationships with peers and adults, and persist in the face of difficulty, their learning increases, and classrooms function more effectively (Jones , et al., 2017).

Nowadays it is clear that without good emotional development, effective learning cannot take place; and that social and emotional skills are the foundation for building not only other SE skills but also cognitive skills (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Indeed, “it is neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion” (Immordino-Yang, 2016). In other words, it is not possible “to boost cognitive skills without actively nurturing noncognitive ones” (Garcia & Weiss, 2016).

Numerous programs are implementing social and emotional learning in schools and other settings. The 4Rs program (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution) is one of them. It focuses on building community, understanding and managing feelings, listening, assertiveness, problem solving, dealing with diversity, bullying prevention and cooperation. 4Rs has been evaluated in a large randomized control trial that followed students over a three-year period. They found overall gains in social competence; gains in standardized reading scores and math scores, and academic skills among children at risk for behavioral problems. Additionally, they found reductions in aggression, hostile attribution bias, aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies, depressive symptoms, and hyperactivity. It also has improved classroom quality and instructional support (Jones , et al., 2017).

Then again, the impact of social and emotional development goes beyond academic and professional effects. Better physical and mental health outcomes are observed in both children and adults with a proper social and emotional development. They present positive health indicators, less emotional distress, fewer adverse health conditions, and reduced mental health problems (Weissberg et al., 2015). Multiple studies demonstrate that social and emotional skills also serve as important protective factors in the face of negative life events or chronic stressors and support general wellbeing, such as job and financial security as well as physical and mental health, through adulthood (Jones , et al., 2017). Higher childhood self-control predicts less adult crime, fewer adult health problems, and greater adult wealth, among others (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

**Relationship between Childhood Self-control and Adult Health Problems (Moffitt, et al., 2011)**



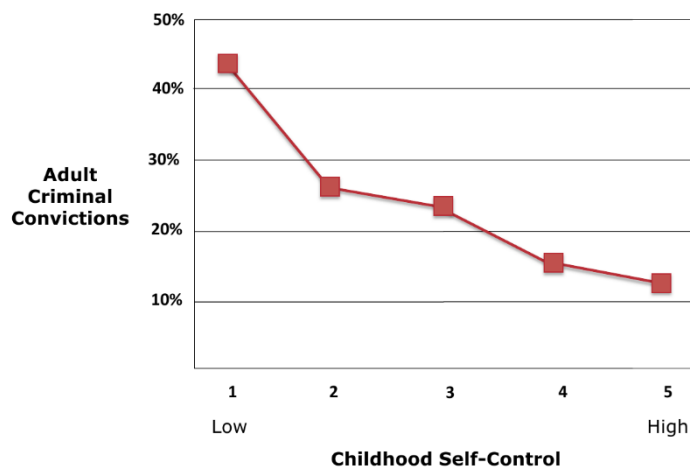
The program ‘Positive Action’ reports, among other results, a reduction in depression, anxiety, substance abuse, violence-related and bullying behavior, sexual activity, aggressive and disruptive behaviors and school suspension. The children that underwent this program gained also in academic performance, positive behavior, motivation, positive affect, and life satisfaction. Positive Action is a PreK-12 program that emphasizes the link between thoughts, actions, and feelings to promote positive self-concept alongside character development and social and emotional learning. The program is based on the philosophy that students feel good about themselves when they do positive

actions to promote an intrinsic interest in learning and becoming a better person. It has been evaluated in three randomized control trials (Jones , et al., 2017).

Relationships benefit from social and emotional learning too. Children learn how to get along better with others and to have positive relationships with teachers, peers, and others; while they develop long-term friendships, and become strong parents, positive family and team members, good neighbors and engaged citizens (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Also, many risky behaviors such as early substance use or substance abuse, delinquency, aggression, violence, bullying, smoking, teenage pregnancy, arrest, and crime can be reduced or prevented with social and emotional learning. Children and youngsters with appropriate social and emotional skills can avoid jeopardizing behavior, reduce conduct, emotional and behavioral problems, and engage in positive and prosocial behaviors (Weissberg et al., 2015).

**Relationship between Childhood Self-control and Adult Crime (Moffitt, et al., 2011)**



Programs like the Mutt-i-grees Curriculum, a PreK-12 program that combines social and emotional learning with humane education building on children’s love of animals, present in their evaluation children’s gains in empathy, prosocial behavior, socio-emotional competence, positive feelings about school and learning, and understanding of shelters and pets. Students with severe behavior problems presented a reduction in aggression. Teachers also reported improvement in job satisfaction, relationships, and beliefs/behaviors that support social and emotional learning (Jones , et al., 2017).

Research has also shown that social and emotional outcomes are effective for students from different ethnic origins and geographical locations (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor , & Schellinger, 2011). SEL programs appear to be successful at all educational levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and in rural, urban, suburban settlements (Durlak et al., 2011).

As has been presented, social and emotional development is highly important for positive outcomes and success in various aspects of life. Moreover, as Garcia clearly states: “beyond their practical import, they are simply positive attributes” (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Many program evaluations have demonstrated gains in academic and professional advances, physical and mental health, and inter-

personal relationships. There is enough evidence calling for us to act and to consider making changes in the way we live, parent, educate and engage with both children and adults. There is too much at stake, and we all can play a role and make a difference in many lives.

## Part 2: What should all of us do?

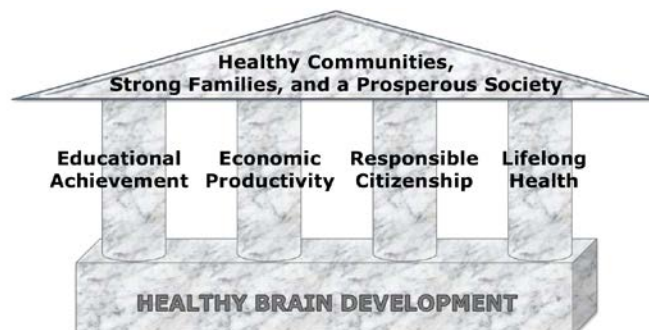
It is crucial to know that we all have a role to play to ensure holistic child and youth development. From parents who interact daily with their children, to famous public figures who model behavior for others, every single person counts, including parents, family, neighbors and community members, education, health and protection systems, governments at various levels, politicians, public figures, mass and social media as well as people from private and social development sectors. Children develop their social and emotional skills according to what they live and learn every single day and from every person who interacts with them and becomes a role model. There are three main actions that, if practiced and enhanced by all of us, will make a difference.

### 1. Ensure nurturing interactions

Relationships are the most vital factor to achieve effective socio-emotional development. “Relationships are the fuel for human development; they foster trust and belief and are a buffer against stress. Children learn through modeling from and interaction with others, whether it be a parent, teacher, other adult or a peer” (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). Although knowledge about and development of social and emotional skills are essential, we cannot ignore that interactions are the driver. “Current focus on student development rightly prioritizes the skills and knowledge that students must acquire, apply and then transfer to new contexts, yet this prioritization cannot eclipse the fact that relationships drive this learning and development” (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). Positive interactions can improve behavior and might also change brain structure and function (McClelland, 2017).

Early childhood is the most important period of life for the development of social and emotional skills. Interactions between adults and babies are pivotal to developing trust, confidence and other relationship building skills (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). The relationship between the baby and his or her main caregiver is essential for the construction of brain architecture. The types of relationships that persons have during early childhood will determine the types of connections their brains will develop, and therefore, their later performance in life.

Professor Jack Shonkoff and his colleagues have devoted a substantial amount of time to understanding the relationships between adult life and early childhood development. His research has shown that healthy brain development leads to creating strong families, healthy communities, and prosperous societies. This healthy brain development represents a solid foundation to support a strong house (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).



Since the human brain is wired for social interaction, the web of relationships in which children develop - home, family, friends, caregivers, teachers, and communities - seriously matter in properly shaping the brain. “Language, cognitive, emotional, and social developments are highly interconnected within the architecture of the developing brain” (Shonkoff, 2017). Everyday experiences build brain architecture during early childhood. A brain that is permanently busy trying to cope with threat, fear or stress cannot concentrate on its own development. Early adversity in life is associated with poor outcomes in health as well as in cognitive and socio-emotional development.

According to Shonkoff, there are various levels of stress. One level is positive stress, since it is critical for survival. In early childhood, it is related to new situations, medical checkups, sharing toys, etc. The second is tolerable stress since it is serious but occurs within a specific period, then disappears, and it is mitigated by responsive relationships. Tolerable stress occurs in specific periods of time, like a family crisis or the death of a loved one. The third level is called toxic stress because it is a prolonged activation of stress systems without protective relationships, leading to negative long-lasting consequences (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Toxic stress has been found in families living in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty. Shonkoff states that it is stress more than poverty that affects child development the most. Evidently, circumstances caused by poverty such as hunger, stunting, and water-borne diseases trigger developmental delays. Additionally, situations of abuse, negligence and adversity can be exacerbated by poverty. All these factors have negative effects on the brain development.

Although it has been proven that more time in poverty means more stress, researchers measured in a study the physical effects of having an overtaxed stress-response system, poverty history and working memory scores (executive function). They found that the three measures correlated—more time in poverty meant higher stress loads numbers and lower memory scores. “But then came the surprise: When they used statistical techniques to factor out the effect of allostatic load [stress load], the poverty effect disappeared completely. It wasn’t poverty itself that was compromising the executive-function abilities of the poor kids. It was the stress that went along with it” (Tough P. , 2012).

Moreover, in some cases children are exposed to a double threat. On one hand, they are affected by excessive and chronic stress, and on the other hand, they are being neglected and therefore missing all the important interactions to build a healthy brain (Shonkoff, 2017).

Nurturing relationships function as buffers against toxic stress; they protect the individual from its negative effects. This is true for all income and education levels (Nelson, 2017). Children affected by stress and/or neglect can develop resilience through supportive relationships and skills building. All children require positive interactions to build a strong and healthy brain. Hence, parents and other adults need to learn accurate skills to offer stable, protective and responsive relationships to their children (Shonkoff, 2017).

At school, the types of interactions between children and adults as well as among children and their peers are also important. It is clear “that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful” (CASEL, 2013). Learning takes place in a positive social and emotional environment. It is through an affirmative emotion that



kids engage in learning, increase their motivation, and better absorb what they are taught. “Recent research has established that the quality of teacher-student interactions and the instructional practices that take place within the classroom are two important predictors of student academic performance and social adjustment” (CASEL, 2013). Although school plays an important role in providing nurturing relations, all settings and all persons offer opportunities to do so.

## 2. Teach social and emotional skills, model them and offer opportunities to practice them

No one is born with a fully developed set of skills, but everyone can build them. Fortunately, social and emotional skills are acquirable and malleable. They can be learned and practiced in all settings and by all people. Since the best period to learn is when the brain is in its early stages of development, early childhood, childhood and adolescence are the finest times to teach social and emotional skills. Between 0 to 3 years of age is when major brain development occurs (Young, 2002). However, this does not mean that after this period it is not possible to learn new skills. Adolescents and adults will learn them at later ages, with great benefit. Nonetheless, if social and emotional skills are learned in the early years, the benefits will be greater and much more productive.

Unfortunately, far too many children fall short of their brain development potential during the critically important early period because their parents and caregivers lacked access to important knowledge and supports (The Boston Basic Campaign, 2018). Parents and caregivers are not always aware of the importance of teaching these skills, sometimes lacking some of them themselves. After decades of investigation, it has become apparent that parenting is an occupation that more and more needs to be learned by parents and caregivers. “Adults who care for young children—whether they are parents, relatives, friends, or staff in early childhood programs—need a solid core of capabilities and knowledge to support healthy child development” (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

There are various settings in which to teach social and emotional skills. At school there are many approaches for teaching social and emotional skills. One approach is to deliver specific lessons about these skills. A second way is to introduce them through core subjects, such as Language or Math. For instance, a group project may be used to develop skills such as collaboration and communication. Another means is to teach these skills during after-school programs (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Any approach chosen should offer opportunities for children to practice their recently acquired skills.

More vital than schools, families and homes are the primary settings where children acquire social and emotional skills. As was already stated, parents, as well as other family members, can teach social and emotional skills and model them. Indeed, there might be some skills that could be better taught at home (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Community members are also central to ensuring that children acquire socio-emotional skills, especially because they can offer many opportunities for practice (CASEL, 2013).

Children need parents and other adults in their lives who teach them and model social and emotional skills, particularly those related to self-regulation (Shonkoff, 2017). Thus, parents require training and intensive practice as well as a transformation of their own relations with others since adult modeling is key for building skills (Stafford-Brizard, 2017) (CASEL, 2013) (Shonkoff, 2017).

In order to appropriately learn social and emotional skills, practice in everyday situations greatly matters. “Effective SEL programming is about more than targeting skills in students; it must also address the broader environment in which children live and learn” (Jones , et al., 2017). This is why the larger settings, neighborhoods, communities, playgrounds and other public spaces are important venues where the skills can be taught and practiced.

### 3. Improve environments

Safe, caring and supportive environments are pivotal to ensuring proper socio-emotional development. In such environments where children feel physically and emotionally safe, they can learn, practice and acquire socio- emotional skills and ensure a healthy development.

In order to be effective, children’s social and emotional development must be embedded in environments at home, at school and in their communities. Children develop in nested and interconnected contexts, from the family, peers, and school to the cultural and political contexts. All of these environments influence the development of social and emotional skills (Jones , et al., 2017). Therefore, the support of the environment is crucial for good socio-emotional development to succeed.

Schools should offer a safe and positive climate for every student. School environments have proved to be a key element for SE development (Cohen, 2006). In some cases, schools might need to change their disciplinary policies to align them with socio-emotional skills acquisition, where the emphasis is on promoting better behavior instead of punishing perceived misbehavior (Garcia & Weiss, 2016) (Shonkoff, 2017). “Zero tolerance policies - like suspensions, expulsions, and arrests - as responses to misbehaviors not only do not prevent these conducts from occurring again, but also are they detrimental for child development. These types of disciplinary policies do not promote good school achievement and a positive school climate; but they do promote dropouts” (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). A poor environment might negatively impact social and emotional development (Garcia & Weiss, 2016).

A safe and supportive environment is also required at home. Parenting could be even more important than school education when looking for solutions to deal with stress (Tough P. , 2012). Parents and caregivers can protect children from the worst consequences of hostile environments when they develop close and caring relationships with them (Tough P. , 2012). Positive parenting builds a solid foundation with lifelong lasting effects (Tough P. , 2012). Children who developed a secure attachment in their early years are more socially competent, more curious, self-sufficient, calmer and more able to deal with obstacles (Tough P. , 2012). Some parents might also need to change their methods of child discipline. Trying to stop misbehavior, instead of trying to promote positive behavior, does not contribute to boosting the child’s self-esteem and development. That is why, families should rely on a respectful and positive disciplinary approach that is designed to teach, practice and model competent social and emotional skills.

Communities also have a role to play. One component to build a healthy brain is strengthening communities where children live (Shonkoff, 2012). Neighbors and other community members might support each other to ensure that all children develop in a safe and positive environment. They can also offer opportunities for children and youth to practice socio-emotional skills. From a physical perspective, a hostile and unsafe environment can cause stress in both parents and children. A dark,

dirty and dangerous public space increases the stress levels of all of those who use it every day. Children and their caregivers require safe, green, clean public spaces where they can walk, play, rest and meet with other community members (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2017). Public spaces, where children feel safe, have the potential to help them develop important socio-emotional skills, such as resilience, responsibility, self-confidence and creativity (Gibson, Cornell, & Gill , 2017). Urban95, an initiative led by Bernard Van Leer Foundation, is an interesting example of community engagement and proper child development. The goal is to offer safe, friendly, and healthy public spaces for young children and their parents or caregivers where child development can be enabled and reinforced.

There are also other major public environments where children and adults spend time and thus, their behavior and character might be shaped: social and mass media. In average, a child younger than 9 years of age spends more than two hours with media (Madigan, Browne, Racine, Mori, & Tough, 2019), while children from 8 to 18 spend around 7.5 hours (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). These two spaces permanently often promote division, fake news, insults, and hatred. Some news, songs and other public figures’ statements are against the very skills every adult should be teaching or at least modeling to their child. Furthermore, research has shown that too much screen time can have an injurious effect on young children. Its increased use has been associated with lower brain development in areas such as language, executive function and literacy skills (Madigan et al., 2019) (Hutton, Dudley, Horowitz-Kraus, DeWitt, & Holland, 2020). Children, and especially young children, benefit far more from positive parent-child interactions.

The following table summarizes some stakeholders and their responsibilities to contribute to a proper social and emotional development.

Action	Teaching SE skills	Modelling SE skills	Offering opportunities for practice	Ensuring positive interactions	Improving environments
Parents or primary caretaker	★	★	★	★	★
Family members	★	★	★	★	★
School personnel	★	★	★	★	★
Health professionals		★		★	★
Community members		★	★	★	★
Government officials		★			★
Public figures		★			★
Mass/social media		★			★
Politicians		★			★
Social sector personnel		★	★	★	★

It is absolutely clear that no matter our role in life, we all are accountable: our words, behaviors and actions count. Everyone should be very aware of them and their impact, not only in lives of children and adult but also all in the greater society.

## Part 3: And then, what?

Prosperous societies depend on the successful development of their citizens, and as already presented, their successful development depends on the inclusion of social and emotional skills in their education and upbringing. Therefore, social and emotional learning and development should be explicitly included in formal education and informal education that occurs during everyday life. There are multiple and different types of programs whose goals are just that: building social emotional skills not only in children but also in adults in various settings. After years of performance and research, there is a range of evidence that can be drawn from to identify important program characteristics that bring about positive outcomes, as well as some challenges that need to be overcome.

### Recommendations

Research has shown that methodological planning, accurate implementation, and thorough program evaluation are key factors for developing effective services for social and emotional development (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016). Therefore, it is pivotal to consider some features found in effective programs with positive outcomes.

Regarding planning, there are 5 key elements related to successful programs. First, a common vision should be established and shared by all stakeholders (CASEL, 2013), where academic and social-emotional skills are equally important, and physical and mental health are also a priority to ensure a whole-child approach (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Second, socio-emotional development should serve as a common framework for different actions such as academic programming, prevention activities, and after-school programs (CASEL, 2013). Instead of having a variety of independent programs, all actions must be aligned with a common vision. Third, strong leadership (Weissberg et al., 2015), accompanied by teamwork, clear roles and commitment among stakeholders, including families, communities, teachers, policy makers, among others at national, regional and local levels are required to make progress in a sustainable way (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Fourth, a clear and appropriate plan is required to achieve goals and targeted skills for every specific age, culture, and context (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). Fifth, an assessment system aimed to ensure quality and continuous improvement is essential to ensure full accountability (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016).

As far as implementation is concerned, apart from ensuring nurturing interactions; teaching, modelling, and practicing socio-emotional skills; and improving environments, there are another 3 major recommendations for executing successful programs. First, planning for strong coordination and accountability among stakeholders at all levels, from families and classrooms to national policies and laws should be guaranteed to ensure commitment, consistency, and high impact (Stafford-Brizard, 2017). Second, the development of a skilled workforce and effective supervisory system should become a top priority, through establishing competent initial and in-service training and guidance for positive coaching, mentoring and reflective supervision (Weissberg et al., 2015). Third, the development of a pilot project with an effective internal monitoring and evaluation system would provide useful information for improving the program and guiding its subsequent phases to scale up services throughout the country (Stafford-Brizard, 2017).

## Challenges

Even with the preparation of a very meticulous and thorough program design and proper implementation, social and emotional development programs may face challenges from different sources. Regarding planning, there is still a lack of awareness regarding the importance of socioemotional skills at various levels, from top decision-makers to teachers and parents. Academic skills are still more valued by a great number of stakeholders (Johnson & Wiener, 2017). Because in some countries there is a lack of research related to socioemotional policies and programs, some of leaders might say they lack the data they need to be sure that such programs would be fully effective (Stafford-Brizard, 2017).

In terms of implementation, a shortage of a skilled workforce that is well prepared and fully committed to providing high-quality services is an important challenge to be addressed, and since the social and emotional field is not a top priority yet, there are not enough incentives to tackle this issue (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). As was already mentioned, often there is not enough research to shed light on the right characteristics of effective programs related to skills, duration, dosages, and so on (Jones, Barnes , Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). Finally, a broader scope is required to help leaders understand that there are many factors involved in the proper socioemotional development of children, and thus, time, commitment and flexibility will be required (Jones , et al., 2017).

## Conclusion: Policy Implications

Our current traditional approach to education is being challenged by available scientific information about the brain, child development and socio-emotional skills. The curriculum based on the Industrial Revolution does not work anymore. Research has also shown that we cannot continue to consider young children as weak beings with a fixed level of development. It is vital to have a clear understanding of children's innate capabilities and their enormous potential to develop both cognitive and emotional skills that are required to thrive in life when they are provided the right interactions, teachings and learning environments. Understanding how children's brains develop should help us change the way we interact with children, support their learning, and model behavior for them. A holistic approach, where physical, academic and socio-emotional components are integrated, is a key factor of successful programs, not only during the first years of life, but also throughout childhood and adolescence periods. Early childhood experiences are pivotal, but they are only the foundation. Children and teenagers require this inclusive approach to keep developing their academic and socio-emotional skills throughout their lives.

A fundamental change in parenting, formal education and social environments is required to motivate children and to ensure they learn the right skills to become healthy, fulfilled and engaged citizens. We need to revisit educational goals, contents, methodologies, and evaluation processes because we are facing a challenge during a limited period of time. With a holistic approach where healthy life styles (sound sleeping and rest, physical activity, proper nutrition, effective use of spare time) are as important as acquiring academic and socio-emotional skills, and with 24-hour days, we need to choose how children and youth use their time wisely: Should children keep using their time to learn what there is in the curricula now or should those curricula be modified to devote more time to cognitive and socio-emotional learning? Should children spend their afterschool time on homework focused on merely academic subjects or should that time be used for learning and practicing social and emotional skills? This issue of time is especially applicable to the activities of their parents or primary caregivers. How much time do these significant adults spend working and commuting to and from work? How much time can they allocate to engaging in positive interactions with their children? How can we help parents to manage their stress, and its negative effects caused by long and sometimes challenging hours of work and commuting?

It is also important to keep in mind that we need a wider perspective related to people involved in the learning process. We cannot rely only on teachers anymore. They are especially important and the ways they motivate children to learn, interact with them and others, and support children's learning processes are crucial for attaining long-lasting, positive effects. However, parents, caregivers, community members, public figures, and adults in general also have important roles to play. Understanding that learning happens not only in the classrooms but also in other spaces like homes, neighborhoods, parks, playgrounds, mass and in social media where children interact with adults and others should encourage policy makers to help all adults to understand the importance of their roles and behaviors.

There is a further and greater challenge for policy makers. They need to align the holistic development of the next generation to meet the current and future demands of the labor market to

have workers and entrepreneurs with certain type of skills, the health system to have individuals with healthy lifestyles, and the government and justice systems to have responsible and committed citizens. For this a pacific revolution from early childhood development to formal education systems and the world of work is required. Families, early childhood development programs, and school systems are responsible for the first and most important 18 years of each child's life, where daily experiences shape their development with critically important consequences for the other systems mentioned above. A more effective alignment among all these systems, stakeholders and periods of life would have a significant impact on children's lives, their communities, their societies, and for generations to come. Ultimately, the holistic and healthy development of all children will bring about the construction of a prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable society.

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