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## Improving Emotion Regulation Skills Among Youth Through Intentional Social-Emotional Learning Lessons in Afterschool Programs

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Source: *Parenting for Brain* ([www.parentingforbrain.com](http://www.parentingforbrain.com))

### ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has a significant impact on youth wellbeing, so incorporating intentional SEL lessons into afterschool program activities helps to enhance the development of SEL skills. Recognizing the need for SEL activities among afterschool youth participants, Extension faculty and afterschool staff from Utah State University used parent and youth assessments and continuous improvement cycle principles to inform program design, implement intentional SEL lessons, and increase emotion regulation skills, resulting in a 25% reduction of risky, negative behaviors among 73 elementary-aged youth.

### IMPROVING EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS AMONG YOUTH THROUGH INTENTIONAL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING LESSONS IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which youth acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to recognize and manage emotions, demonstrate care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively (Durlak et al. 2014; Taylor et al., 2017).

Providing youth with SEL programs, characterized by safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments, has been found to reduce risky behaviors, increase positive self-perception, and enhance academic attainment (Durlak et al., 2011; Prince et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). Introducing SEL lessons during elementary school years is positively related to increased social and mental health outcomes and effective classroom functioning, as well as student learning (Devaney & Moroney, 2018). When youth can focus their attention, manage negative emotions, and positively navigate peer relationships, they are more likely to have better grades and higher standardized test scores (Jones et al., 2017; Kwon et al., 2016).

Furthermore, providing intentional SEL lessons in afterschool settings allow for greater focus on SEL skills development because afterschool programs do not have school-day curricular demands and allow for broader developmental goals. Afterschool programs create environments that directly influence emotional development by providing opportunities for youth to form relationships with peers and caring adult mentors, helping to enhance SEL skills development (Devaney & Moroney, 2018; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Additionally, afterschool-based SEL lessons are effective in promoting targeted SEL competencies, increasing social and academic adjustment, and decreasing conduct issues and emotional distress (Taylor et al., 2017).

## THE ROLE OF EMOTION REGULATION

**E**motion regulation refers to the capacity of youth to manage their emotional responses, including employing strategies to increase, maintain, or decrease the intensity and duration of positive and negative emotions. The ability to recognize and regulate emotions aids youth in maintaining and focusing attention, empathizing with others' perspectives, and interacting positively with peers. Increasing emotional regulation skills help youth recognize, express, and regulate their own emotions and handle their feelings in prosocial ways (Jones et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019). Positive emotion regulation skills among elementary-aged youth have been positively related to academic functioning, including motivation and engagement. Studies show that youth who displayed higher levels of emotion regulation participated more actively in class, leading to high levels of academic performance, engagement, and competence (Kwon et al., 2016).

Moreover, after-school programs provide youth with increased opportunities to develop emotion regulation techniques through SEL skills-building exercises because youth participants are afforded the ability to practice and perform targeted skills pertaining to emotion regulation. Application of those skills to real-world experiences and frequent feedback from after-school educators allow youth to take an active role in their learning and focus on personal improvement (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).

## PURPOSE

Sanpete County's afterschool program operates four days per week at four elementary schools, serving 73 youth in kindergarten through 6th grade. Located in rural Utah, the program is comprised of low-income youth who have been determined by school administrators to need extra academic and social interventions based on testing scores and behavior management. Additionally, 96% of youth program participants are eligible to receive free and reduced lunches. The need for incorporating SEL lessons focusing on emotion regulation came to the forefront based on needs assessment data from parents and youth pre-test results.

A pre-program, institutional review board (IRB) approved needs assessment survey was disseminated to all parents (N= 45) who had youth enrolled in the afterschool program. Thirty-six parents completed the survey, resulting in an 80% response rate. Survey results indicated a need for focusing on SEL lessons with parents reporting the following:

86% of parents expressed the importance of their child(ren) learning life skills such as effective communication, positive problem-solving techniques, and conflict resolution strategies.

82% indicated that including social-emotional learning lessons in afterschool programs was a needed skill for their child(ren).



Source: Sanpete County 4-H Afterschool

Additional IRB-approved evaluations addressing multiple measures related to SEL, including self-responsibility, healthy and prosocial behavior, and emotion regulation were administered to 73 youth in grades K-6 who participated in the afterschool program. Due to the diverse age range, trained afterschool educators employed procedures such as reading evaluation questions and working one on one with younger youth to ensure comprehension.

Pre-test results pointed to a need for intentional lessons and activities that focused on emotion regulation based on scores indicating that 38.36% (12.33% completely agree + 26.03% agree) of youth reported that they cannot control their anger when disagreeing with others. Research relating to the benefits of SEL, coupled with parent feedback and youth pre-test results, served as the catalyst for Extension faculty and afterschool staff to develop a plan for incorporating SEL lessons into afterschool program activities, primarily focusing on emotion regulation.

## METHOD

Sanpete County's afterschool program is a collaborative effort between Utah State University Extension, North Sanpete School District, South Sanpete School District, and multiple community agencies. Afterschool program activities are held daily (Monday–Thursday), serve youth from low-income families, and provide a combination of academic and enrichment lessons. Funding for all program activities is provided by Utah's Department of Workforce Services, Office of Child Care.



Source: Sanpete County 4-H Afterschool

Needs assessment data, coupled with research highlighting the importance of SEL programming, served as the driving force behind the implementation of intentional SEL lessons for afterschool youth. Additionally, Extension faculty and afterschool educators employed the continuous improvement cycle (Hamre, 2014; McKown & Herman, 2020) to inform program practices. Afterschool professionals planned a course of action to improve SEL developmental skills, then executed the plan weekly for six weeks using research-based lessons from the A Little Spot of Feelings & Emotions curriculum. Lessons were grounded in Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) principles and aligned with Common Core Standards (Alber, 2021). The CASEL framework serves as a foundation for communities to use evidence based SEL strategies in ways that are most meaningful to their local context and align with each communities' strengths, needs, and cultures (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Weekly lessons incorporated a variety of learning techniques including hands-on group activities, creative writing, arts & crafts, and STEM. Coping strategies were introduced and helped youth acknowledge and manage overwhelming

feelings and emotions. Additionally, reflection and discussion segments allowed for youth to share and connect their feelings to real-world experiences. The next step required the collection of data from multiple sources, including youth, afterschool educators, and parent evaluations. Pen-paper surveys were disseminated to youth, whereas afterschool educators and parents completed evaluations through on-line Qualtrics surveys. The final step within the continuous improvement cycle required afterschool professionals to adjust the plan based on evaluation results. It was through this process that Extension faculty and afterschool staff were able to successfully implement SEL lessons to meet program goals, which yielded positive results among youth participants.

## RESULTS

Participation in SEL lessons resulted in learning and behavior changes among youth participants as new skills and practices were put into place. In order to gauge the effectiveness of the action plan and SEL lessons, pen-paper post-test evaluations were conducted with youth participants. Additional online post-test evaluations were conducted with afterschool educators and parents.

### YOUTH POST-TEST EVALUATION RESULTS

Six weeks after weekly SEL lessons were implemented during afterschool program sessions, youth ( N =73) participated in an IRB-approved post-test to determine emotion regulation skills. Results of the post-test indicated that the action plan had been successful. When compared to pre-test assessment scores of 38.36%, only 13.7% (8.22% completely agree + 5.48% agree ) of youth reported that they cannot control their anger after participating in emotion regulation lessons. Intentional SEL lessons focusing on emotion regulation skills resulted in a 25% reduction of negative, risky behaviors.



Source: Grade Power Learning  
([www.gradelearning.com](http://www.gradelearning.com))

### AFTERSCHOOL EDUCATOR EVALUATION RESULTS

Emotion regulation has been positively associated with increased academic motivation and engagement, as well as contributing to more effective learning environments (Devaney & Moroney, 2018; Kwon et al., 2016). To gauge the effectiveness of SEL lessons, afterschool educators ( N =12) from all four school sites participated in IRB-approved evaluations. Survey results indicated program objectives were met with 90% of afterschool educators reporting a decrease in impulsivity among youth and an increase in youth applying positive techniques for controlling their emotions, resulting in positive changes in daily afterschool environments.

## PARENT EVALUATION RESULTS

Parents with youth attending afterschool program activities indicated a need for SEL lessons in a pre-program needs assessment. At the end of the six-week lesson cycle, parents were asked to share feedback concerning SEL skills development among their children. The following verbatim narratives were chosen to show program impact:

- “Since she has started the program, I’ve seen her confidence level rise. I have seen her self-esteem rise. There have been many positive outcomes that we wouldn’t have otherwise had.”
- “It has helped provide a healthy outlet for controlling his emotions.”
- “He is able to get supervised social interaction and positive peer leadership. In the few months he has participated I have seen a dramatic difference in his confidence, his behavior, and overall better positive outlook on life.”
- “It truly helps kids develop socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Our family is so grateful to have a safe and positive place for our kids.
- “The program has helped increase confidence and provided experiences for problem solving.”

## SUMMARY

Extension professionals in Sanpete County, Utah used needs assessment data and research to create an action plan for implementing SEL lessons in afterschool settings at four elementary schools. The purpose of providing SEL lessons was to equip afterschool youth with positive emotion regulation skills, and successful implementation resulted in a 25% reduction in negative risky behaviors. In addition, afterschool educators noted positive changes in afterschool environments, including increased engagement among youth participants. Furthermore, parents reported positive changes in SEL competencies, including increased confidence, self-esteem, and healthy emotional control.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTENSION

A significant aspect of program success lies in the intentionality of implementing SEL lessons over a set period; however, Extension programs can incorporate activities that encourage problem-solving skills and address emotions among youth participants. In addition to improving SEL skills development, Extension professionals who combine SEL activities with other learning subjects have an influential role in providing impactful learning environments that promote increased peer relationships, personal improvement, and engagement in real-world situations.



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