

THE POWER OF LIFE SKILLS FOR HEALTHIER FUTURES

Parents, caregivers, and educators each play a crucial role in the growth and well-being of students. It is essential for all groups to work together to support students in every facet of their lives.

Today, students face a multitude of challenges that have an effect on their overall well-being. The pressures of social media, competitive college selections, and the lingering effects of the global pandemic, to name a few, have significantly impacted their needs. By working together, educators, parents, and caregivers can ensure students have the necessary skills to navigate these life challenges successfully.

Social-emotional learning (SEL)—also known as positive youth development or life skills—is widely supported by families, students, and educators. SEL provides valuable skills and lessons that contribute to students' success throughout their lives. In a world that demands more than just academic knowledge, students need life skills that will guide their personal and professional journeys, help them think critically under pressure, and empower them to make informed, responsible decisions.

Skills for Life Success

Life skills competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building skills, and responsible decision-making. Students learn to share, take turns, overcome failure, and identify changes in mood, enabling them to develop healthy relationships, control impulses, persist in the face of challenges, and constructively resolve conflicts.

Student Health Benefits

Life skills have been shown to have a number of benefits on student health, including:

- Reduced emotional distress. Students can identify and manage their emotions in a healthy way, which can lead to a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression.^{1,4}
- Improved school climate. A more positive and supportive school climate can lead to a reduction in bullying, violence, and other risk-taking behaviors.^{1,4,5}
- Enhanced relationships. Students learn how to build and maintain healthy relationships, which can lead to a greater sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community and have a positive impact on mental health.^{2,4}
- Reduced risk of substance abuse. Students learn how to make healthy choices and resist peer pressure, which can lead to a reduced risk of substance abuse.^{2,3,5}



Enhanced Well-Being and Mental Health

Life skills help students develop important protective behaviors and beliefs—like emotion regulation, self-efficacy, and relationship-building—against mental health challenges.¹ With youth suicide rates on the rise, life skills interventions offer valuable tools to address the risk factors associated with suicide. Research indicates that self-awareness and emotion regulation can protect against suicidal ideation.² Moreover, the development of healthy relationships reduces feelings of hopelessness, another risk factor for suicide.² While life skills are not a substitute for mental health treatment, it can contribute to a multi-tiered system of supports in schools, working alongside mental health professionals to improve student well-being.

Improved School Climate and Safety

Life skills have been associated with numerous positive outcomes related to school climate and safety. Students who participated in life skills interventions in school reported feeling more engaged and having better relationships with their educators.⁴ Feeling connected to the school community not only supports student mental health but also reduces violence, aggression, and bullying.⁵

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the benefits of life skills for student health and safety. Such programs improve mental health outcomes and contribute to creating a safe and inclusive school environment. By addressing risk factors for suicide, reducing disruptive behaviors, and promoting positive social interactions, such interventions play a vital role in enhancing student well-being. As more schools prioritize life skills in their educational practices, the potential for positive change in student health and overall academic success becomes even more significant.

Success Stories and Promising Practices

When school districts implement life skills programs, the impact is felt community-wide. Principals have reported decreases in bullying and disciplinary issues, educators have reported increases in attention, students have reported a calmer, more connected school environment, and parents have reported their children's positive emotional regulation in their interactions at home. Below are examples of districts and schools that successfully implemented life skills programs.

Denver Center for International Studies (Denver, CO)

Denver Center for International Studies (DCIS) is a public magnet school for grades 6–12 in Denver, Colorado. The school's interest in supporting students' social and emotional health resulted in the development of *Mente y Movimiento* (which translates to "Mind and Movement"), a mind-and-body program that fosters mental and physical health. The physical education instructor works with students every day on their social-emotional health. She and other educators lead check-ins to normalize students talking about their emotions. There is a daily mindfulness and life skills class that has covered topics like empathy, assertive communication, mindful breathing, mindful eating, tai chi, understanding brain chemistry, handling mistakes, and recognizing emotions. All of this has added to decreases in anxiety and depression among students and a more positive environment for students and educators to connect and learn.⁶



Tooele County Public Schools (Tooele, UT)

Tooele County Public Schools (TCPS) is a small rural school district with 27 schools spanning 200 miles between them. The district has a unique mix of school sizes, demographics, and needs. In 2015, the school district experienced a tragic series of youth suicides. As a response to students' emotional and mental health needs, they implemented an evidence-based life skills curriculum in all elementary and junior high schools. Two years later, the school district recorded decreasing rates of youth suicidality (and substance use), even while other counties in the state continued to experience increases.²

Mindfulness and Life Skills Curriculum

The Mindful School's mission is to empower educators to spark change from the inside out by cultivating awareness, resilience, and compassionate action in the community. Their mindfulness and life skills curriculum has documented positive effects on children's mood and teacher ratings of students' attention, self-control, and pro-social behavior.

The MindUp mission has been helping children globally develop the mental fitness necessary to thrive in school and throughout their lives. The MindUp curriculum has been associated with reductions in behavioral problems and improvements in social and emotional competence, behavioral regulation, adaptive skills, and executive functioning.⁷



¹ Greenberg, M.T. Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools. Learning Policy Institute. 2023.

² Posamentier, J., Seibel, K., DyTang, N. Preventing youth suicide: A review of school-based practices and how social-emotional learning fits into comprehensive efforts. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. 2023, 24(2): 746–759. <https://doi-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/10.1177/15248380211039475>. doi: 10.1177/15248380211039475.

³ Clarke, A., Sorgenfrei, M., Mulcahy, J., Davie, P., Friedrich, C., McBride, T. Adolescent mental health: A systematic review of the effectiveness of school-based interventions. Early Intervention Foundation. 2021.

⁴ Cipriano, C., Strambler, M., Naples, L.H., Ha, C., Chang, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., Zieher, A., Eveleigh, A., McCarthy, M., Funero, M., Ponnock, A., Chow, J., Durlak, J. The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/6PQX2.

⁵ Greenberg, M.T., Weissberg, R.P., O'Brien, M.U., et al. Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *The American Psychologist*. 2003, 58(6-7): 466–474. <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/58/6/7/466>. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.58.6-7.466.

⁶ Daily social-emotional health program dramatically reduces depression & anxiety in students. Action for Healthy Kids. March 29, 2021: <https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/story/daily-social-emotional-health-program-dramatically-reduces-depression-anxiety-in-students/>.

⁷ Sciotto, M., Veres, D., Marinstein, T., Bailey, B., Cehelyk, S. Effects of a school-based mindfulness program for young children. 2021, 30(6): 1516–1527. doi: 10.1007/s10826-021-01955-x.