

## SUMMER READING FOR SECOND STEP ADMINISTRATORS

Contributing writer Kim Gulbrandson, PhD, is a research and evaluation coordinator and education consultant. These articles, previously published on the Committee for Children blog, discuss SEL as it relates to restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, MTSS, and character education. We hope her expertise helps you make the most out of your SEL practices and informs your decisions for the school year.



**Kim Gulbrandson**  
SEL in Education Blogger  
Committee for Children

### Articles In This eBook

[Don't Miss These Connections Between SEL and Trauma-Informed Practice](#)  
[Want to Implement Both SEL and Restorative Practices? Read This](#)  
[Implement SEL Within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support \(MTSS\) \(Part 1\)](#)  
[How SEL Supports Your MTSS Efforts \(Part 2\)](#)  
[Character Education and SEL: What You Should Know](#)

## DON'T MISS THESE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SEL AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

**Why and how SEL is key for ensuring all children are provided universal, trauma informed supports.**

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Written by: [Kim Gulbrandson](#)



Kids who experience trauma can be silent sufferers. That's partly because trauma is stored in the nonverbal part of the brain so it's not something easily identified, talked about, or expressed verbally. It may only show up through behaviors. Trauma is also in the perspective of the person experiencing it, so an experience may be traumatic for one person but not for another. Because we cannot typically know which children have experienced trauma, it's important to use trauma-informed practices with all children and provide universal, trauma-informed supports throughout schools and classrooms. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is key for ensuring this happens, and this blog discusses why and how.

## **Adult SEL Skills Are Directly Tied to Our Ability to Be Trauma Sensitive**

Trauma-informed practices are primarily about providing kids safe spaces and environments. Adults need social-emotional competencies to be able to foster this type of environment so that kids feel supported and can thrive. To be able to recognize when someone is experiencing an emotion or not feeling safe, adults need to have and use good listening skills and understand other perspectives, seeing as best they can through the child's eyes. Adults also provide safe environments by approaching kids with empathy and understanding, validating feelings and behavior, and building relationships. When we aren't calm we respond more quickly to triggers and often in negative ways, so it's important to manage our stress and control our impulses. Trauma-informed practices also means building social-emotional competencies for students to empower all who are affected by adversity and help them cope with the trauma. It would be difficult to teach, model, and foster these skills if we did not have them ourselves.

### **Supporting Student SEL Is a Trauma-Sensitive Practice**

SEL helps children survive and cope in various situations. Trauma affects kids' social-emotional skills, such as their ability to identify, express, and manage emotions. Children exposed to trauma may internalize their feelings because they don't have vocabulary to express their experiences, or they may externalize aggression, anger, and fear because they learn to perceive situations as dangerous.

SEL teaches kids to connect their actions to their thoughts and feelings by noticing feelings and physical sensations in their bodies, such as heat (embarrassment, shame), pressure (stress), tingling, muscular tension (anger, nervousness). When kids start understanding the physical sensations of their bodies and connecting them to emotions, only then can they learn how to name and describe their feelings, such as sadness, frustration, or anger. This is how they safely learn to express their feelings in a healthy way, verbally or nonverbally, and learn the coping strategies for managing their feelings as well.

While not all kids will experience trauma, they will all face challenges at some point in their lives, so all can benefit from learning skills for managing adversity. A trauma-sensitive environment that supports kids' need to feel safe and supported—paired with strong adult social-emotional competencies and SEL supports for students—helps ensure kids will cultivate healthy student behaviors and have opportunities to thrive in the face of difficulties and hardships. So why not get started by making those explicit connections between your trauma-sensitive and SEL practices!

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[Second Step](#) clients can use [this alignment chart](#) to help create a trauma-sensitive school.

See how our [Second Step SEL curriculum](#) helped this Utah school district and its community after experiencing a traumatic series of suicides and deaths in 2015. Visit [SecondStep.org/tooele](https://SecondStep.org/tooele)



## WANT TO IMPLEMENT BOTH SEL AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES? READ THIS

### Examples and Tips to Help You Integrate and Maximize these Programs' Benefits

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Written by: [Kim Gulbrandson](#)



Are you currently implementing a restorative practices or social-emotional learning (SEL) program and now considering implementing both? Are you already using both restorative practices and an SEL program? If so, are you wondering how to better coordinate efforts so they intersect and are not disjointed?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, systemic implementation is essential. The alignment and coordination of programs and practices is pivotal to ensuring both efforts are successful. To implement these practices systematically and efficiently, all those involved in carrying out the practices benefit from having a solid understanding of how restorative practices and SEL can work together. These

examples and tips will help you integrate restorative practices and SEL programs to maximize the benefits of both.

## **Both Efforts Support Similar Outcomes**

Both SEL and restorative practices are positive approaches to student behavior in that they promote positive environments and give students direct opportunities to develop and use positive skills. If implemented together and implemented well, both can help to boost the same outcomes, such as improved school climate, student-student and student-teacher relationships, reduced conflicts, and decreases in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions.

***Tip:** Identify which of your school and/or district outcomes SEL and restorative practices will help to improve, and show others how both can collectively support those outcomes. Connect both efforts in your action plan and your measurement of the plan's success.*

## **Restorative Practices Support the Development of SEL**

Restorative practices is a process through which SEL skills are further learned and refined, and it provides a safe physical and emotional environment for doing so. Once adults teach a social skill lesson and model and practice the skill with students, efforts often move to teaching a new skill, and another. If the previously learned skills are never revisited, students may lose or forget to use them. That is where the restorative practice process comes in. The circle process, for example, increases the likelihood students will use their skills because they have regular opportunities to talk about and practice them. The process provides structures for respectfully listening, gaining insight into how others are feeling, sharing feelings and experiences, managing emotions, and much more.

***Tip:** During circle time, foster increased awareness and use of social skills by asking students to share what social skills they used and which ones they saw others using.*

## SEL Helps Students and Adults Navigate the Restorative Practices Process

When students have skills to listen, show empathy, disagree respectfully, establish positive relationships, understand and manage emotions, and handle challenging situations effectively, they can participate in the restorative practice process with more ease and confidence.

- When a student experiences an emotion during circle time, she can use her skills for managing and expressing those emotions, while others in the circle will need their skills for identifying emotions.
- Having social skills is helpful for all types of restorative practice circles. Students use their listening, perspective taking, and empathy skills when participating in a circle of understanding, and they're more equipped to solve a dilemma in a conflict circle when they have problem-solving skills.

Adults can also more effectively navigate and support restorative processes when they use their social-emotional skills because use of skills such as listening and respect for others can foster positive relationships, the core of restorative practices.

Integrating SEL within the school culture and curriculum goes hand-in-hand with the use of restorative practices. Restorative practices provide students and adults with a positive community, process, and opportunity to put their social and emotional knowledge and learning into practice, and social-emotional skills provide the foundation needed to successfully navigate the restorative process and all that comes with it.

***Final tip:*** *If implementing both SEL and restorative practice efforts, take time to plan for how you will support systemic implementation. Think about having the same team or department lead and support both initiatives, and if this isn't possible, ensure time for collaboration across teams.*

For more information on how restorative practices and SEL align, check out this [Second Step-Restorative Practices Alignment Chart](#).

# IMPLEMENT SEL WITHIN MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT (MTSS) (Part 1)

## Behavior-Focused Examples of what SEL Supports Look Like within MTSS

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Written by: [Kim Gulbrandson](#)



Also referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI) for academics or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) for behavior, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a continuum of evidence-based academic and behavioral practices that are matched to student needs. It's a framework for helping school personnel adopt evidence-based behavioral interventions to improve academic and social behavior outcomes for all students.

For the past 20 years, I have supported social-emotional learning (SEL) in many capacities at the school and district level. I am also deeply connected to MTSS efforts. While supporting both, I've navigated misunderstandings and concerns regarding implementing them together, and learned much along the way. I hope

this two-part series will help you harness the strengths of MTSS and SEL to meet the needs of all your students.

The MTSS framework is identified by several key characteristics, including selecting practices based on evidence for effectiveness, and planning and implementing interventions organized along a tiered continuum. These are behavior-focused examples of what SEL supports look like within MTSS.

## **Be Selective**

Selecting practices based on needs and evidence of effectiveness means taking care with new practices and being sound consumers of data. Know what outcomes you want and identify strengths and weaknesses in your data before making additions or modifications. Tie decisions to the needs identified in data, such as student attendance and school climate results.

### **For Example:**

- Climate survey data show students and parents feel that the students don't have opportunities to develop strategies to manage their feelings and actions. Teachers don't feel the school provides resources for them to support SEL. After digging deeper into the data, it's decided that the staff needs more professional development in SEL and the school needs a social skills curriculum. Results from a social-emotional behavior rating screener given to all students, such as the [Devereux Student Strengths Assessment-mini](#), and minor office disciplinary referral (ODR) patterns show which skill areas need support. The school leadership team reviews the [effective social and emotional learning programs](#) guide from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to find the best curriculum options that address these needs.
- There's a high rate of minor ODRs for inappropriate comments during math. It's determined that students need more explicit teaching, and practice in perspective taking and managing strong emotions. Anchor charts are introduced in these classrooms and teachers more explicitly reference the

matrix, re-teaching and practicing expectations during small-group routines. Students then regularly self-monitor and ask for feedback.

The SEL approaches you adopt based on your data should be [SAFE](#)—sequenced, active, focused, and explicit—and procedures should be taught throughout the year. Students need social, emotional, and behavioral skills as well as clear understanding of expectations in order to succeed.

## **Organize Interventions in Tiers**

There are three tiers of support in MTSS. Tier 1 offers universal supports for all students, tier 2 offers targeted supports to provide short-term interventions to remedy problems, and tier 3 offers intensive supports, which are individualized interventions to address specific needs. Each tier is an additional layer of support. One of the common misses with SEL and MTSS is that SEL supports are often provided at tiers 2 and 3 but not tier 1. For example, school psychologists, social workers or counselors may pull out small groups of students to teach them social skills even though there are no universal SEL supports in place in the school.

Strong tier 1 supports promote behavioral, social, and emotional development to prevent challenges from emerging and ensure students have the skills needed for meeting expectations. Tier 2 supports are for students who, according to data, do not respond to tier 1 supports, not students who lack high-quality social and behavioral supports to begin with. In the example of small-group instruction, the teachers and other students cannot reinforce positive use of social skills when they have no connection to what is being taught in the small groups. In such situations, the transfer of social skills to other settings is not likely unless the small groups are an extension of the already existing tier 1 supports.

Use data to determine what you will support and how you will support it, and consider universal social, emotional, and behavioral supports for all students.

Look for my next post on SEL-MTSS to see more examples of how to make connections for seamless implementation!

[Take a look at the Second Step SEL Program and Student Support Frameworks \(MTSS/RTI/PBIS\) alignment chart.](#)

## HOW SEL SUPPORTS YOUR MTSS EFFORTS (Part 2)

**More Examples and Tips to Help You Integrate and Maximize these Programs' Benefits**

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Written by: [Kim Gulbrandson](#)



[In my last post](#), I discussed what is needed to teach social-emotional competencies within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework through teaming, use of data to identify what competencies and expectations are most needed, and by ensuring there's extensive and comprehensive instruction for all students. Now, let's dig deeper into how to implement both social-emotional learning (SEL) and MTSS.

### **Both Support the Development of Positive Competencies**

Both SEL and MTSS are about explicit teaching, and students benefit from explicit instruction in social skills and behavioral development.

The MTSS matrix is a chart that clearly communicates a school’s expectations for positive social, emotional, and academic behaviors in various school environments. It aids teachers and administrators in teaching, modeling, and reinforcing these behaviors in the classroom, hallway, playground, cafeteria, and home.

Social and emotional skills equip students to meet the expectations, procedures, and routines made explicit in the matrix. We teach, model, and practice these smaller skills that go into the bigger skills. Take this middle and high school matrix as an example, which shows how the expectations within the matrix encompass many different social and emotional skills.

### Matrix Example

	Learning	Whole Group Learning	Group/Partner Learning
<b>Be Responsible</b>	Arrive to class on time and ready to learn	Ask clarifying questions	Actively participate in discussions (accountable partner talk)
	Stay organized to meet deadlines	Take notes as needed or instructed	Redirect group members if they are off task
	<b>Regulate emotions</b> Maintain physical space		
<b>Be Respectful</b>	Use positive words and actions	Actively listen to the teacher/ speaker	Understand and respect others' perspectives
	Appreciate individual and group similarities and differences	<b>Express emotions in a way that keeps others safe and your image clean</b>	Negotiate conflict constructively
	Use teacher direction and adjust voice volume		
<b>Be Engaged</b>	Use nonverbal and verbal language to communicate	Prepare to use the resources from the lesson	Stay on topic
	<b>Set and work toward personal and academic goals</b>	Ask on-topic extension questions and stay curious	Use techniques to keep the work moving forward
	Use academic language		

To be able to **successfully regulate and express emotions in a way that keeps others safe**, students need skills for identifying feelings, managing anger, frustration, and disappointment, handling mistakes and accusations, managing hurt feelings, calming down through self-talk, avoiding assumptions, and handling put-downs.

Students are more equipped for **setting and working toward personal and academic goals** when they have skills for making a plan, solving problems, seeking help, planning ahead, and breaking down big goals into smaller steps.

“When social and emotional competencies are directly connected to the schoolwide expectations and the teaching matrix, staff may be less likely to view them as an extra burden or a separate initiative.”

*Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies within a PBIS Framework, p. 6, line 3, Barret, Eber, McIntosh, Perales, & Romer, 2018*

Social skills are not taught in isolation; they are taught in context. This is where the matrix comes in. The matrix guides instruction and makes expectations and support explicit. It ensures that the skills taught are being used, and it helps to monitor progress to determine what needs to be re-taught and practiced. If implemented and supported correctly, it also gives students more opportunities to practice in the natural environment because the skills are reinforced and practiced across multiple settings and routines.

## Focus on Growth and Feedback

All skills need instructional support, whether specific social skills or more general expectations. These four elements are part of SEL and MTSS implementation, and they can be powerful influencers on student learning. All four are typically part of a strong, evidence-based social skills curriculum.

- **Explicit teaching:** Break down skills into steps and further define within lesson plans.
- **Re-teaching:** Do this in-the-moment, as an instructional response to behavior, or during dedicated time. Should be based on data showing the need to re-teach or extend previous teaching.
- **Prompting:** Reduce the need to correct students with short 2–5 minute prompts based on previously taught skills. Prompt prior to a transition or new activity.
- **Feedback:** Make it short. Include both verbal and nonverbal feedback. Focus on what the student is doing well. Correct only if needed.

Both SEL and MTSS set students up to be successful. They each offer something. If you are implementing both in your school or district, I hope this provides a useful guide for how the two may look when skillfully implemented together.

[Take a look at the Second Step SEL Program and Student Support Frameworks \(MTSS/RTI/PBIS\) alignment chart.](#)

# CHARACTER EDUCATION AND SEL: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

**Self-Awareness and Skills, Not Instruction in Values, Is the Heart of SEL**

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Written by: [Kim Gulbrandson](#)



Are you wondering whether character education and social-emotional learning (SEL) are the same?

You're not the only one.

Character education is often used interchangeably with SEL, despite the differences. Misunderstandings affect decisions about what programs we implement and how, and may lead to over-implementation and additional, unnecessary work for educators.

## **Character Education and SEL Have a Lot in Common**

Character education emphasizes teaching children core values like perseverance, courage, honesty, generosity, kindness, fairness, commitment, a positive attitude,

and tolerance. I recently visited a school's daily morning character assembly and heard adults singing the song lyrics "Do your best, be your best."

The SEL process, as outlined by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL), helps "children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." Teaching the skills around these core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness—is the heart of SEL.

## What Exactly is SEL?

There are many character education approaches available to schools, and some include SEL in their titles or descriptions. So how do you know if they are SEL? According to CASEL, [effective SEL approaches](#) should be evidence-based and incorporate these four SAFE traits:

- **Sequenced:** Coordinated and connected core activities that foster skill development.
- **Active:** Active forms of learning to help students master new attitudes and skills.
- **Focused:** A component that emphasizes developing social and personal skills.
- **Explicit:** Targeting specific social and emotional skills.

To answer the question of whether a character education program is also SEL, look for whether the character education program, instructional practices, or strategies fit CASEL's SAFE acronym.

- Is there explicit teaching of specific skills in one or more of the five SEL competencies, such as identifying feelings, making friends, managing frustration, solving problems, or calming anger? For example, if students are taught what gratitude is but there is no instruction on skills for expressing gratitude, it is not explicit.

- Is the focus on building, teaching, modeling, prompting, coaching for, and practicing skills, or is it only about building knowledge, explaining importance, and telling students what the core values are at the school?

## Skills and Understanding

According to [CASEL](#), SEL is a process through which children and adults “acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills” crucial to the core competencies. That means SEL is not only about skills. It is also about understanding one’s own attitudes and how they contribute to behavior so that one can make responsible decisions. If a character education program tells students they should have certain values rather than teaching them to be aware of how their values affect their behavior so they can make good choices, it is not clearly SEL.

Character education and SEL overlap, and it isn’t always easy to distinguish between them.

- They have similar goals for students, such as success in life, contributing to the community, becoming responsible, caring adults, making positive decisions, and successfully facing obstacles and challenges. Both also look to positive outcomes, such as reductions in violence and bullying, and improved student achievement.
- Character and social skills can be cultivated.
- Students learn to care about core values by developing social-emotional skills such as empathy skills.
- Character education and SEL may involve student reflection on their own values and how those contribute to behaviors.
- Both can foster a positive school climate and community where people treat each other kindly.
- Social skills are intertwined with character. Listening, showing compassion, and helping others all make up a person’s character. Character reflects one’s social skills, and social skills can build character.

## So, What's the Difference?

An important difference between SEL and character education is that some character education approaches are focused on developing morally responsible youth, and that is not the defining characteristic of SEL. It is important to make that distinction. Teaching morals and values can raise concerns about whether they can be changed, and whether instruction is the responsibility of families or schools. Giving youth the knowledge and skills for being self-aware, developing relationships, and making responsible decisions so they can successfully navigate the challenges in life is what SEL is all about.

Although often used interchangeably, character education and SEL are not the same. Knowing the similarities and distinctions helps us to be more careful, reflective, and deliberate implementers of evidence-based practices that align to our goals, vision, and mission.

Character.org's "[11 Principles of Effective Character Education](#)" gives a deeper look at character education, including how it is defined, what it looks like, and how schools and organizations can intentionally cultivate character. To discover more about social and emotional learning, visit Committee for Children's [What is SEL?](#) page.