Ways of Being: Social & Emotional Learning in Youth Programs
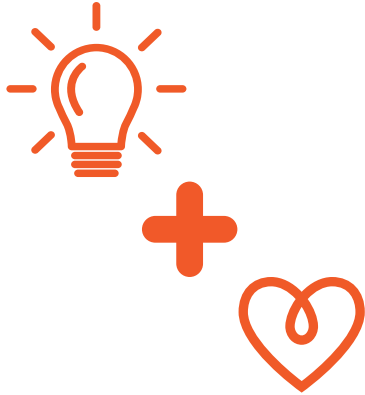
SO WHAT IS SEL ANYWAY?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as a *"process through which young people enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks."* This broad set of skills that young people need for success goes beyond academic content/ knowledge. SEL includes skills related to managing one's own emotions and behaviors, developing healthy relationships, and making good decisions.

Some of you may be asking, "Hey! Isn't that just a fancy term for '21st Century Skills', 'Non-Cognitive Factors', or 'Soft Skills'?"

While certainly related, there are still limitations to these terms:

- The skills represented under the umbrella of '21st Century Skills' aren't new to this century; they've been valuable for a long time.
- For 'Non-Cognitive Factors' (things like social skills, motivation, perseverance, self-control etc) it is important to remember that ALL skills, whether they are emotional, social etc. require thinking and cognition.
- The term 'Soft Skills' has a negative connotation that suggests that these skills are less than others.

WHY SHOULD YOU INCORPORATE SEL INTO YOUTH PROGRAMS?

Youth development programs are uniquely positioned to support social and emotional learning. These programs often engage young people in real-world projects, work in teams, take on meaningful roles, and encounter challenges.

Let's face it, when young people get together, there are always a lot of emotions involved. It's important to help young people learn how to manage these emotions and use them in a positive way.

SEL skills are:

- **Meaningful:** They can predict important long-term outcomes of academic and life success and help balance the over emphasis on achievement tests.
- **Measurable:** They can be assessed reliably.
- **Malleable:** They can be intentionally shaped in school and out-of-school time settings. These skills are teachable and are not fixed traits.

HOW CAN ADULTS SUPPORT SEL IN YOUTH PROGRAMS?

- Adults have the unique opportunity of being present when young people encounter different emotions. Adults can therefore help foster awareness and encourage reflection. By monitoring young people's emotions, adults can call attention to them before a problem happens. From this, adults can help young people to reflect on how their emotions are influencing their thoughts and behaviours in a program.

- They can provide alternate strategies on how to manage emotions based on each person and their situation. An example of this is being aware of the levels of frustration among young people in a program. If a young person is very frustrated, an adult leader can suggest a variety of alternatives such as recommending that the young person take a break, they can sit with the young person to help them deal with their frustration, or they can pair the young person with a mentor who is more experienced in the program and can therefore, help the youth work through their frustration

- Adults can also encourage problem solving through emotional coaching.

STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING SEL IN YOUTH PROGRAMS
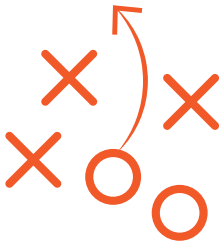
- Equip Staff: ensuring that staff members are aware of their own SEL so they can practice what they preach.

- Create Everyday Learning Environments: Being aware of, and implementing routines, positive expectations, and the norms that you want your program to achieve.

- Use Data for Improvement: It's not about proving your program works; it's about adjusting and improving what you do.

- Design Impactful Learning Experiences: Use the S.A.F.E model.

SAFE MODEL	
SEQUENCED	Does the program apply a planned set of activites to develop skills in a step-by-step fashion?
ACTIVE	Does the program use active forms of learning?
FOCUSED	Does the program devote sufficient time exclusively to SEL goals?
EXPLICIT	Does the program target specific SEL skills?

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