Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division

Tiny Hands, Big Feelings: Growing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Early Years

January 15, 2026

About the
California Early Childhood Special Education (CalECSE) Network
## *Funded by the CDE*

https://www.calecse.org

CalECSE is a technical assistance project funded under the CDE that supports Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), County Offices of Educations (COEs), and other Agency Partners in the areas of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to B Transitions, Preschool Assessment Practices, and Preschool Child Find by providing technical assistance, professional learning, and demonstration of tangible practices that have been proven successful.

CalECSE leverages collaboration amongst agencies, disseminates resources, highlights existing exemplar practices, and provides direct technical assistance to improve the capacity, knowledge, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices across agencies throughout California.

The CalECSE Network is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families by eliminating and addressing barriers to successful transition for California's youngest children with disabilities.

The CalECSE Network Leadership Team
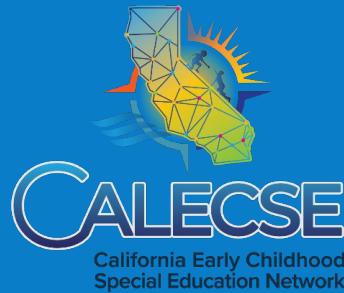
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A Network of Support

ASSISTING
CONNECTING
BUILDING CAPACITY
COLLABORATING
COORDINATING

CalECSE
California Early Childhood
Special Education Network
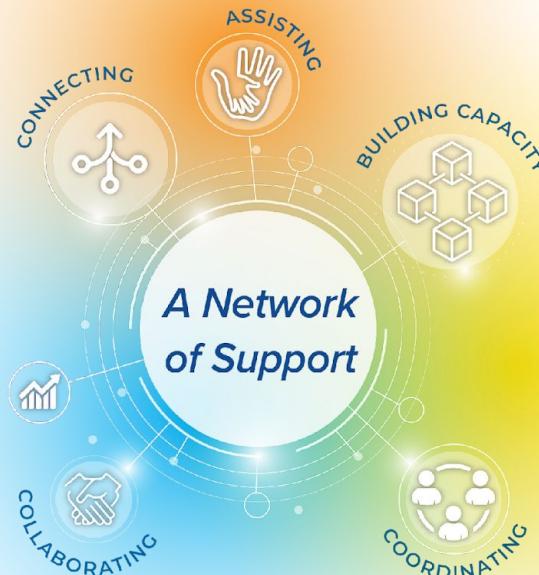
What We Will Cover Today:

- Social-Emotional Development

- Preschool Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF)
  - Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL)

- Frameworks for Supporting Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
  - Teaching Pyramid
  - Embedding in everyday routines

- Curriculum, Tools, Resources Review

Social-Emotional Development

Why Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Matters

- Builds emotional intelligence and self-awareness

- Strengthens relationships and empathy

- Fosters resilience and problem-solving

- Prepares children for lifelong learning and success

Social Emotional Developmental Milestones One to Two Years

Toddlers (one to two years)

- Start to say "mine" and explore independence

- Show early empathy (patting a crying friend)

- Begin taking short turns with lots of adult help

- Express big feelings but need co-regulation from adults

- Understand fairness and rules better

- Use words and strategies to manage frustration

2 Years - Notices when others are hurt or upset, like pausing or looking sad when someone is crying. cdc.gov/Milestones

https://www.cdc.gov/act-early/milestones/2-years.html
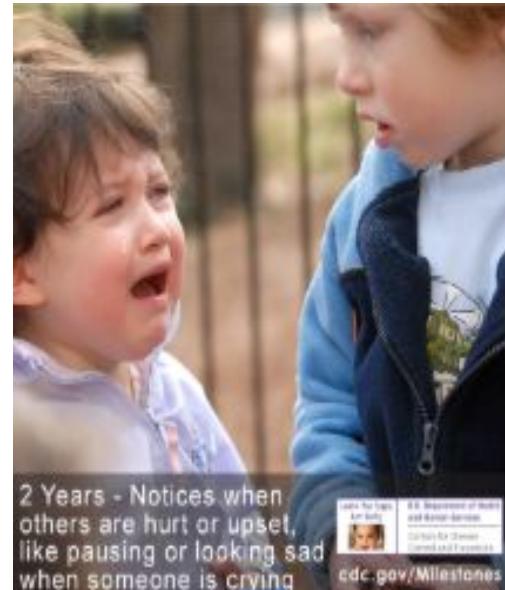
Preschoolers(PK)/Transitional Kindergarten (TK) (three to four years)

- Learn to name feelings ("I'm mad," "I'm sad")

- Practice sharing, cooperating, and playing with peers

- Begin problem-solving with adult guidance

- Show empathy and care toward friends

https://www.cdc.gov/act-early/milestones/4-years.html

4 Years - Comforts others who are hurt or sad, like hugging a crying friend

cdc.gov/Milestones

Kindergarten Age (five to six years)

- Strengthen self-regulation (waiting, calming down)

- Develop more complex friendships

- Understand fairness and rules better

- Use words and strategies to manage frustration

Know Typical Early Childhood Development First: Know the Milestones

Center for Disease Control (CDC) Developmental

Milestones Tracker

Learn the Signs. Act Early. Checklist available at:

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC

_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf

Resources for Early Childhood Educators from the CDC

website, which can be accessed at:

https://www.cdc.gov/act-early/early-childhood-educators

/education.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/nc

bddd/actearly/ccp/early-care-and-education.html

MILESTONES MATTER: LET'S TALK ABOUT THEM!

MILESTONES AT 4 MONTHS
- ☑ Begins to babble
- ☑ Responds to affection

MILESTONES AT 6 MONTHS
- ☑ Likes to play with others
- ☑ Responds to own name

MILESTONES AT 9 MONTHS
- ☑ Has favorite toys
- ☑ Understands "no"

MILESTONES AT 1 YEAR
- ☑ Tries to say words you say
- ☑ Waves "bye-bye"

MILESTONES AT 2 YEARS
- ☑ Begins to run
- ☑ Begins to sort shapes, colors

MILESTONES AT 3 YEARS
- ☑ Knows name and age
- ☑ Climbs and runs well

Get free milestone checklists for these ages and more at www.cdc.gov/Milestones or by calling 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).

Learn the Signs. Act Early. Developed in partnership by the University of Missouri and the US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Self-Regulation and Emotional Regulation

Self-Regulation

● The ability to manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors so you can reach a goal or meet expectations.

● Involves planning, controlling impulses, focusing attention, and calming down when needed.

● Example: A child waits patiently for their turn in a game, even though they're excited to go next.

Emotional Regulation

● Part of self-regulation: Specifically about noticing, understanding, and managing emotions.

● Includes recognizing feelings, calming big emotions, and expressing them in healthy ways.

● Example: A child feels frustrated when a block tower falls but takes deep breaths instead of throwing blocks.

Self-Regulation and Emotional Regulation

In Other Words

- Emotional regulation means managing feelings.

- Self-regulation means managing feelings, behaviors, and attention in order to achieve a goal.

🌱 In early childhood, children often develop emotional regulation skills first (like naming feelings, using calm-down strategies). These skills then build into self-regulation, which is more complex and includes decision-making and behavior control.

Adapted from concepts in the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011) and Calkins & Fox (2002).

Examples of Self-Regulation in a Three Year Old

- Starting to wait a short turn (with reminders—like waiting a minute before using a toy).

- Following simple directions, especially with visual or verbal prompts.

- Using words or gestures ("help me," "stop," "mine") instead of only crying or grabbing.

- Beginning to calm down with support—may respond to hugs, a quiet space, or breathing with an adult.

- Shifting attention briefly when distracted by something new (helpful for stopping an unwanted behavior).

- Showing empathy in small ways, like offering a toy when another child is sad.

Still Developing (and very normal!)

- Meltdowns when tired, hungry, overwhelmed, or told "no."

- Difficulty calming down without adult help.

- Strong attachment to "mine!" when it comes to toys.

- Trouble waiting for longer periods.

- Wanting to do it themselves in the way they think it should be done.

- These skills do not appear all at once. They grow step by step with a lot of modeling, practice, and support from caring adults.

- A three-year-old is not expected to regulate on their own. They need scaffolding and co-regulation from adults.

- This means adults also need to be able to regulate themselves so they can be present and support the child in their regulation.

A note on Sensory Processing and Self-Regulation

While self-regulation is the ability to manage one's emotions, behaviors, and attention in order to meet the demands of a situation, sensory processing is how the brain receives, organizes, and responds to information from the senses (sight, sound, touch, movement, taste, smell, body awareness, balance). It helps children interpret and respond appropriately to the environment.

Sensory processing challenges can impact self-regulation. Self-regulation strategies often depends on understanding sensory needs.

Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF)

What are Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAPs)?

- What it is: Teaching and learning that match how young children (preschool to third grade) grow, learn and develop.

- Why it matters: Children learn best when instruction fits their age, individual strengths, and cultural/linguistic background.

- Core ideas:
  - Learning is hands-on, active, and play-based.
  - Expectations are realistic for the child's age and stage.
  - Instruction is responsive to each child's needs, interests, and family context.
  - Supports both academic skills and social–emotional growth.

Source: https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents

- SEL is the process for children and adults to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, feel and show empathy, build relationships, and make responsible decisions.

- Five core competencies:
  - Self-Awareness
  - Self-Management
  - Social Awareness
  - Relationship Skills
  - Responsible Decision-Making

- Emphasizes integration into routines, instruction, and school-wide practices

SEL Development Foundations

- Domain: Social-Emotional Development (SED)
- Focus on how young children:
  - Understand and express emotions
  - Form secure relationships with adults and peers
  - Participate in group settings and follow routines
  - Develop empathy and prosocial behaviors
- Foundations are organized along developmental continua (e.g., 48 and 60 months and beyond)

- PK/TK SED foundations provide early-childhood entry points to CASEL competencies
- Both emphasize:
  - Understanding and managing emotions
  - Building positive relationships with adults and peers
  - Cooperating, taking turns, and solving social problems
  - Developing empathy, care, and responsibility
- PK/TK foundations are developmentally sequenced to reflect early learning progression

Self-Awareness and Self-Management

- CASEL to PK/TK Foundations examples:
  - Self-Awareness
    - Recognizing own emotions and preferences → SED foundations on identifying and expressing basic emotions or sense of self
  - Self-Management
    - Regulating emotions and behaviors → SED foundations on impulse control, managing strong feelings, following rules and routines with support

- Early focus is on co-regulation with adults, then gradual independence

Social Awareness & Relationship Skills

- CASEL to PK/TK Foundations examples:
  - Social Awareness
  - Perspective-taking, empathy are the SED foundations on noticing others' feelings
    - Showing care, responding to peers' needs
  - Relationship Skills
    - Cooperation, communication, resolving conflicts are the SED foundations on entering play, sharing, taking turns, using simple strategies to solve problems
  - Emphasis on relationships with both adults and peers as the context for learning

Responsible Decision-Making

- CASEL to PK/TK Foundations examples:
  - Responsible Decision-Making
    - Making caring, safe choices which focuses on SED foundations of understanding
    - Simple rules, cause and effect in social situations, and consequences
    - Early problem-solving focused on using adult support to choose safe, fair solutions
- Decision-making in PK/TK is supported by modeling, prompts, and guided practice

PK/TK Foundations as the SEL Base

- Create coherence with California's broader TK–12 SEL efforts
  - Provide a common language for SEL growth across early learning settings
  - Emphasize:
    - Warm, responsive relationships
    - Predictable routines and environments
    - Play-based opportunities to practice SEL skills
- Set the stage for later grade-level SEL standards and practices

Implications for PK/TK Practice

- Design environments and routines that intentionally support SED foundations
- Use CASEL language to connect early learning to TK–12 SEL initiatives
- Plan instruction that:
  - Embeds feeling language and problem-solving in everyday activities
  - Prioritizes relationships and co-regulation
  - Provides repeated practice with feedback

Frameworks for Supporting Social Emotional Learning

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations

https://challengingbehavior.org/

- Multi-tiered approach of evidence-based practices to support infants, toddlers, and preschoolers

- Focus on improving the social, emotional, behavioral outcomes for young children, birth to five years of age

- Provide technical assistance and training in order to adopt, implement, an Teaching Pyramid model

Teaching Pyramid

Positive Behavior Support (PBS)

https://challengingbehavior.org/pyramid-model/behavior-intervention/pbs/

- Research-based approach to addressing challenging behaviors in a non-aversive manner

- Begins with understanding why a child engages in a particular behavior

- Teaching of skills and strategies to prevent the occurrence of the behavior and to manage the behavior should it occur

Tier 3 | Intensive Individualized Intervention — Intensive interventions for a few students

Tier 2 | Targeted Small Group Instruction — Targeted support for some students

Tier 1 | Core Instruction & Universal Supports All Students — Practices in place at all times for all students

Teaching Pyramid

Sample Training Modules

https://challengingbehavior.org/training/for-trainers/modules/

Infant/Toddler
- Introduction and Understanding Social-Emotional Development
- Focusing on Relationships
- Understanding Behavior

Preschool
- Introduction to the Pyramid Model
- Teaching Social-Emotional Skills
- Addressing Challenging Behavior

Introduction & Understanding Social-Emotional Development

Classroom Implementation/Strategies

https://challengingbehavior.org/implementation/classroom/overview/

- Universal classroom practices to promote social-emotional learning

- Universal and targeted instructional practices to promote social-emotional skill development

- Classroom interventions to support children with social-emotional and behavioral needs

Practical Strategies for Classrooms

https://challengingbehavior.org/implementation/classroom/practical-strategies/

- More strategies that can be implemented in a classroom setting

Teaching Pyramid

Infant/Toddler Classrooms
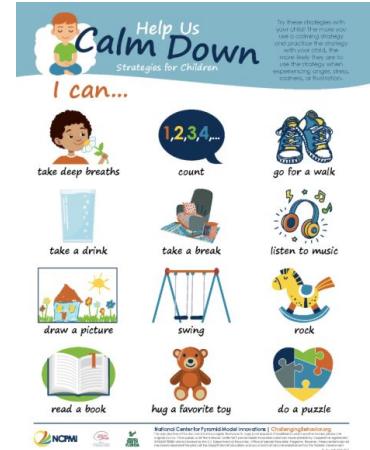
https://challengingbehavior.org/implementation/classroom/infant-toddler-classrooms/

- Developmentally appropriate strategies to use with our youngest students

Pyramid Model Implementation Checklist for Preschool Classrooms

https://challengingbehavior.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Pyramid-Practices-Checklist-for-Preschool-2-5-years-Classrooms.pdf

- A tool designed to be used by practitioners to identify training needed and/or classroom implementation strategies

Teaching Pyramid

Family Connection

https://challengingbehavior.org/implementation/family-engagement/

- Family engagement and building positive relationships with families is an important component of social-emotional skill development
- Teaching Social-Emotional Skills at Home
- Building Relationships
- Family Handouts
- Other Resources

Parent Training Modules

https://challengingbehavior.org/training/for-trainers/modules/#parents

- To help professionals working with families to promote children's social-emotional development and address challenging behaviors

Teaching Pyramid

California Teaching Pyramid

https://cainclusion.org/teachingpyramid/

- A systematic framework promoting children's social-emotional development and appropriate behavior

- Built on the evidence-based foundation from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI)

- Training for the leadership team, teaching staff, and families

- Practice-based coaching and implementation for the teaching staff

Embedded Instruction/Learning

Embedded instruction, or embedded learning, is a teaching strategy that integrates targeted skills instruction into naturally occurring daily routines and activities, rather than using separate lessons.

Embedded Instruction for Early Learning - California (EIEL) was developed by Desired Results Access Project to tie Teaching Pyramid, the framework for embedded instruction, the PS Learning Foundations, and students' individual needs together.

Embedded instruction practices are supported by research and are evidence-based.

Desired Results Access Project ©2022 California Department of Education

Embedded Instruction/Learning

Embedded Instruction Early Learning - California was rebranded a couple of years ago to become CalBloom|Early Learning Everyday. Participation in CalBloom includes professional learning, practice-based coaching, and implementation of embedded learning practices.

CalBloom ffers instructional practices that are planned and intentional for teaching children with disabilities in inclusive preschool classrooms.

For more information on CalBloom, go to:
https://www.draccess.org/calbloom

Connecting to Teaching Pyramid

FEW → Targeted instruction embedded in everyday learning activities

Teaching Pyramid Interventions ← SOME

ALL → PS/TK Learning Foundations
DRDP Assessment
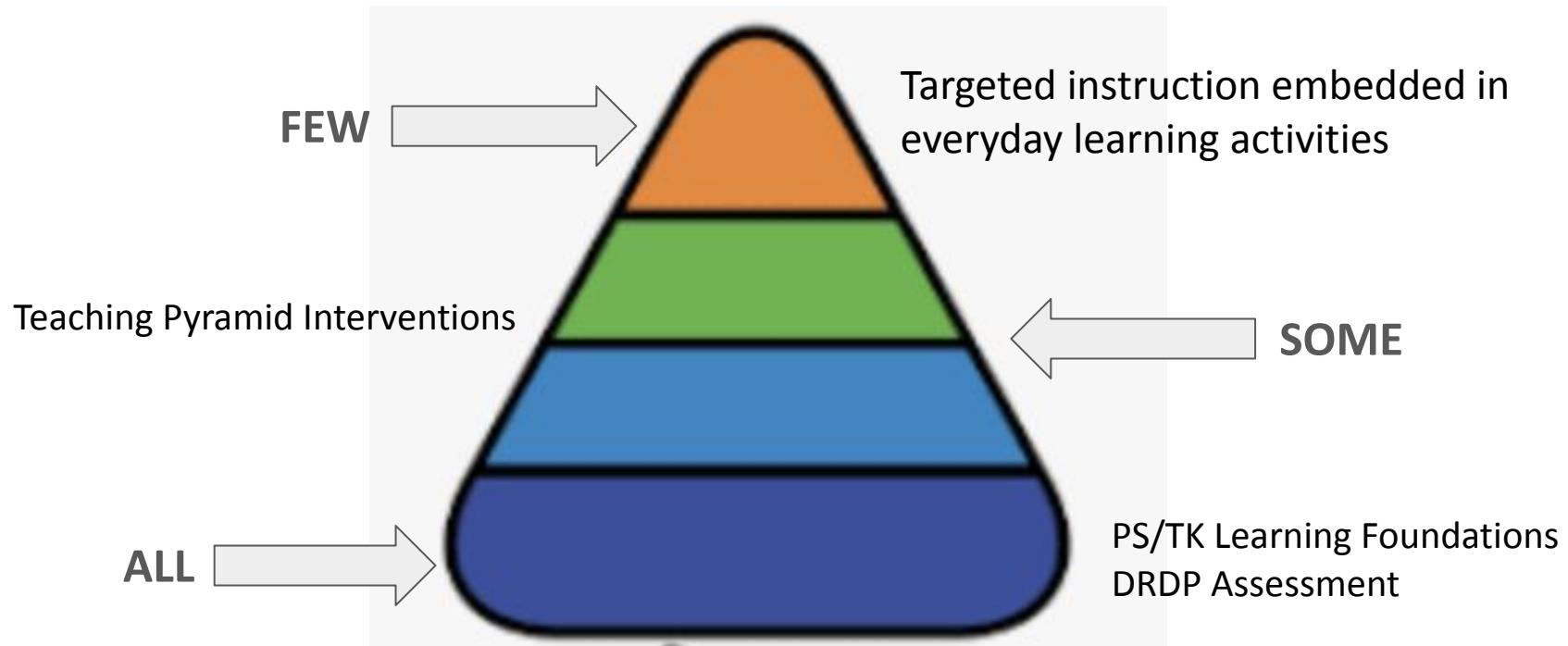
What to Teach and When to Teach It

Learning targets are chosen by IEP goals, performance on the DRDP, or PS/TK Learning Foundations.
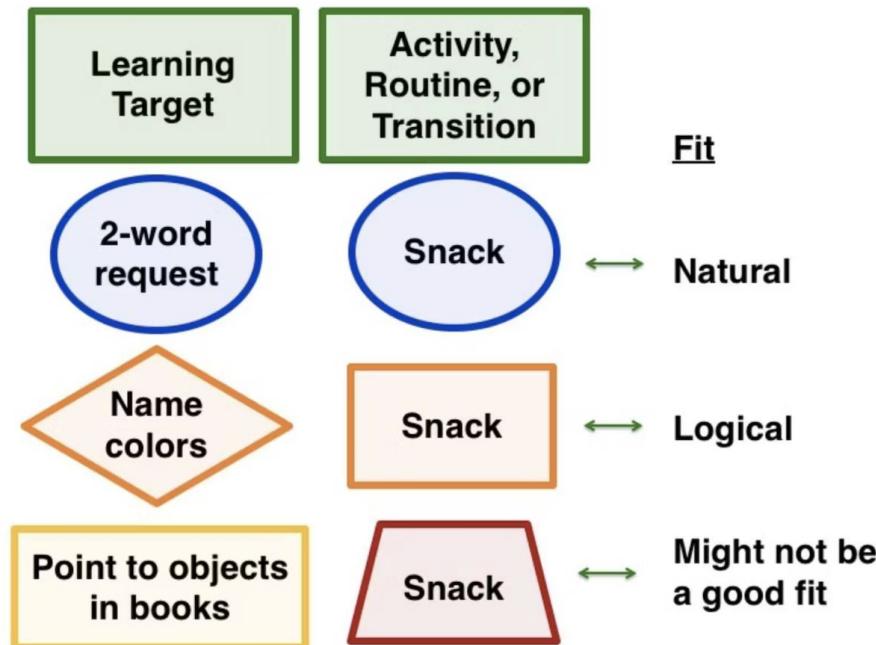
Embedded Instruction/Learning

	Davion	Matthew	Nilah
Arrival	Walk up and down stairs		Greet peers
Circle		Use single words to name pictures or objects	
Centers	Use 2-3 words to initiate play Count up to 3 objects	Hold marker/paintbrush to make marks on paper	Follow 1-step directions Use both hands to pour
Outside	Use 2-3 words to initiate play		Greet peers Use both hands to pour
Snack	Use 3 word phrases for requests Count up to 3 objects	Use single words to name pictures or objects	Use both hands to pour
Class Activity	Use 3 word phrases for requests	Hold marker/paintbrush to make marks on paper	Follow 1-step directions
Free Play	Use 2-3 words to initiate play Count up to 3 objects Use 3 word phrases for requests	Use single words to name pictures or objects	
Departure	Walk up and down stairs		Follow 1-step directions

Key Practice

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) doesn't require "extra time." It becomes powerful when it's naturally woven into daily interactions, helping children build the skills to manage emotions, develop empathy, and thrive in relationships.

Three Key Practices:

1. Integrate SEL into Everyday Routines
2. Support Emotional Regulation
3. Create Nurturing Environments that Foster Resilience & Connection

Using Pyramid Strategies & Embedded Instruction in Everyday Routines

- Morning Greetings: Offer choices (high five, fist bump, wave) to promote positive connections.

- Transitions: Use songs, breathing exercises, or visual cues to guide children smoothly between activities.

- Choice Time/Play: Embed problem-solving and turn-taking prompts ("What could you try if you both want the same toy?").

- Storytime: Select books that highlight feelings, friendship, and empathy, followed by reflection questions.

- **Name It to Tame It:** Teach children to identify and label emotions using visuals or mirrors.

- Calm Corners: Provide a cozy space with sensory tools (soft toys, stress balls, calming visuals).

- Breathing & Movement: Practice simple techniques like "smell the flower, blow the candle" or animal stretches.

- Modeling & Coaching: Narrate your own calm-down strategies so children see regulation in action.

- Consistent Routines**:** Predictability builds a sense of safety and trust.

- Positive Language: Highlight effort and progress ("You worked hard to solve that puzzle!").

- Connection Rituals: Use daily check-ins, partner activities, and group reflections.

- Family Partnerships: Share SEL strategies with families so skills are reinforced at home.

Evaluation of the Instruction Within the Frameworks

As with any good instruction, you will regularly evaluate the success of the instruction and the child's learning and make adjustments to your teaching as you go.

- Collect data
- Is there consistency in implementing the teaching strategies?
- Is it working for the child? Is the child making progress?
- What adjustments do we need to make? or What do we need to work on next?

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) & Response to Intervention (RTI)

Tier 1 – Universal: A classroom-based program that promotes social and emotional learning by teaching children the skills to understand their emotions, peacefully communicate feelings to others, develop positive relationships, manage conflicts and challenges, and make and keep friends.

Tier 2 – Prevention: A program to be used in small group settings to focus on specific skills that are especially problematic for students who require extra support. Children can be pre-taught concepts to prepare them for classroom-based intervention.

Tier 3 – Intervention: A program for a small subset of students who need intensive, individualized intervention to master skills (i.e., students with individualized support plans or Individualized Education Plans, IEPs).

SEL Curriculum

Kimochis

The Kimochis® curriculum can stand-alone or enhance and extend an existing character education program.

When used school-wide in each classroom or through school-wide assemblies, the Kimochis® program helps schools build a strong, positive, communicative school culture and climate. The Kimochis® curriculum provides lesson plans for Preschool through Grade Five. A wealth of resources are also available for free online. Story books are available for purchase along with plushy characters and structured Lesson Plans. The materials are fun and engaging. The curriculum provides children, educators and parents a common vocabulary that allows everyone to "speak the same language" bridging school and home.

https://www.kimochis.com/about/sel-benefits/

SEL Curriculum

Kimochis® lessons promote emotional intelligence and wellbeing by fostering the five core SEL competencies as outlined by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL):

- Self-Awareness *(I am aware of what I am feeling.)*

- Self-Management *(I have helpful communication tools to manage big feelings with care and kindness.)*

- Social Awareness *(I am aware of what others are feeling.)*

- Relationship Skills *(I show I care what others feel and use tools to stay connected and kind.)*

- Responsible Decision Making *(I have tools to help me make choices that are kind and caring to me and others.)*

https://www.kimochis.com/training/

Second Step Early Learning

- Designed specifically for early learning environments for ages four through five
- Taught through 28 weekly themes that included five-to seven-minute activities to be taught throughout the week
- Teaches self-regulation, focusing attention, empathy, emotion management, friendship skills, problem solving and transitioning to kindergarten
- Cost for a kit $600-$850

https://www.secondstep.org/early-learning-curriculum

SEL Curriculum

Pros:
- Improves social emotional and executive function skills
- Evidence-based
- Comprehensive & engaging
- Reinforces skills (includes materials for parents to use at home in Spanish & English)
- Teacher friendly (little to no prep needed)
- Can re-use materials

Cons:
- Initial Cost for some
- Mixed academic results

Frog Street Comprehensive Curriculum

- Research-based early childhood structured curriculum
- Supports cognitive, physical, language, and social-emotional development from birth to age five
- Integrates social-emotional learning using strategies like Conscious Discipline®
  - Conscious Discipline utilizes brain-state awareness to help children develop self-regulation, build relationships, and resolve conflicts
- Dual Curriculum-two years: includes digital access $4,600; English or Spanish only $4,000

https://www.frogstreet.com/

SEL Embedded in Curriculum

Pros:
- Bilingual support
- Comprehensive but with emphasis on SEL
- Integrated approach
- Strong foundation for K
- Positive learning outcomes
- Teacher friendly materials

Cons:
- Requires supplementation (science & creative arts in particular)
- High material costs
- Overly structured to some
- Less flexibility

SEL Tools and Resources

Based on the Pyramid Model, the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learners (CSEFEL) is focused on promoting the social emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age five. CSEFEL is a national resource center funded by the Office of Head Start and Child Care Bureau for disseminating research and evidence-based practices to early childhood programs across the country.

https://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html

Center on the
Social and Emotional
Foundations for Early Learning
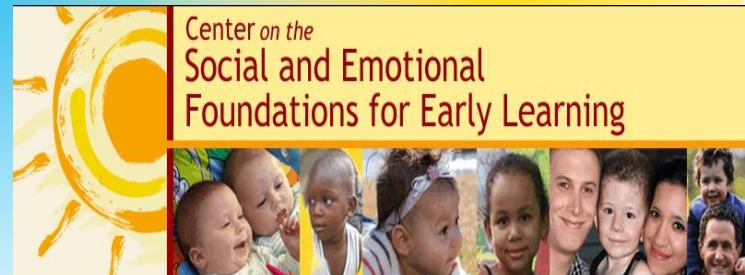
SEL Tools and Resources

Provides Practical Strategies for

Teachers/Caregivers:

- Scripted stories for social situations
- Tools for Working on Building Relationships
- Book List
- Book Nook
- Teaching Social Emotional Learning
- Tools for Developing Behavior Support Plans

https://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training_parent.html
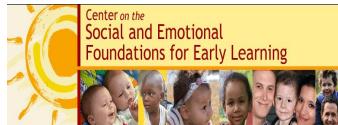
Provides Practical Strategies for Families:

- Parent Training Modules
  - Making Connection!
  - Making it Happen!
  - Why do Children Do What They Do?
  - Teach Me What To Do!
  - Facing the Challenge (Part 1)
  - Facing the Challenge (Part 2)
  - A Family Workbook, and a Facilitators Guide

Questions?

Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CalECSE 2026 Symposium Registration

CalECSE
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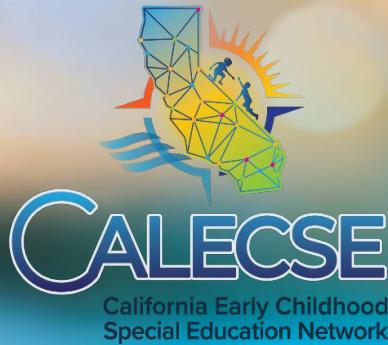
Please help us improve our practice and complete the zoom survey following this session.

After doing so, you will be entered into a raffle to win a free registration to CalECSE's 4th Annual Symposium to be held in Northern California October 20–21, 2026. Valued at over $500.

Interested in joining a local Community of Practice (CoP) for practitioners who support children ages zero to five ?

Find our full schedule of regional CoPs at: https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/communities-of-practice

Communities of Practice
California Early Childhood Special Education Network

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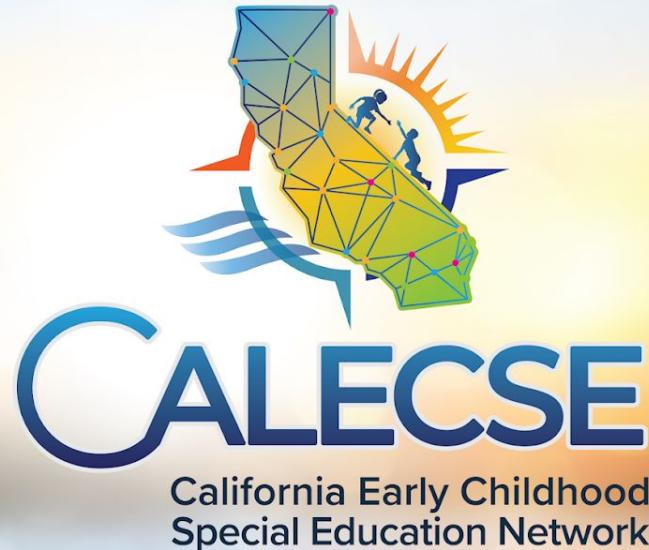
Find our full line-up of no-cost trainings at:
https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/intentional-practices-meaningful-impact