



Position Statement on Biblical Social Emotional Learning

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) Early Education services exists to **strengthen Christian early education programs** and **equip early educators**. These Christian school leaders and early educators prepare young children (birth-2nd grade) **spiritually, socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively** while influencing them to love and follow **Jesus Christ**. We believe instruction should address all developmental domains and be Biblically integrated, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant. Researchers believe children develop morally based behaviors and beliefs between two and five years of age.¹ **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** is a valuable approach to fostering holistic child development that helps young learners develop essential life skills related to emotions, relationships, and decision-making. It focuses on self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. **Social and emotional development** during the early years, from birth through age five, are critical developmental domains and play a vital role in shaping a child's overall well-being and later moral and faith development. The connection and interactions with caregivers set the stage for social interaction and emotional response throughout childhood. Within a school culture, positive interactions can greatly enhance social and emotional development. Data collected in the Flourishing School Culture© research suggests purpose, relationships, teaching and learning, expertise and resources, and wellbeing are predictive domains which promote a flourishing school culture and community.² This position statement addresses the importance of social and emotional learning, professional development, Biblical integration, and teaching SEL in Christian education.

The scriptures indicate "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people." (Luke 2:52) Favor or charity, Gk. is defined as graciousness, of manner or act. This development of the whole child is exemplified in the lives of Samuel and other Biblical characters. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) defines SEL as "the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that help direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school, work, and life."³ The word of God must be the foundation for instructional practices. In the context of **Christian education**, integrating SEL with biblical principles can reduce challenging behaviors and support trauma-informed instructional

¹ Sturgeon, J. (2022, April 5). *Building the foundation: The benefits of integrating faith-based routines in Early Childhood Education*, Northwestern College Graduate & Adult Studies Blog: Northwestern College in Iowa. Northwestern College Top Christian College. <https://www.nwciowa.edu/online/blog/entry/57/building-the-foundation-the-benefits-of-integrating-faith-based-routines-in-early-childhood-education>.

² Swaner, L., C. Dodds, and M.H. Lee. 2021. Leadership for flourishing schools. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI. Retrieved from: [fsci-leadership-report-2021.pdf \(acsi.org\)](#)

³ Gagnier, K. M., Okawa, A., and Jones-Manson, S. (2022). Designing and Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs to Promote Equity. White paper produced by AnLar and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; Education, Innovation, and Research Program (EIR).

practices.^{4, 5} Due to the current mental health crisis and increase in developmental delays, the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that early educators complete inclusion training, which consists of social-emotional competencies.^{6, 7}

The five social–emotional competencies (SECs) include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.⁸ They are defined as follows (with scripture references):

1. **Self-awareness:** Understanding one’s own emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. (Romans 12:3)
2. **Self-management:** The ability to regulate emotions, control impulses, and adapt to changing situations. (Galatians 5:22-23)
3. **Social awareness:** Being attuned to others’ emotions, perspectives, and needs. (1 Peter 2:17)
4. **Relationship skills:** Building healthy connections, resolving conflicts, and communicating effectively. (Matthew 22:37-39)
5. **Responsible decision making:** Making choices based on ethical principles, considering consequences, and being accountable. (Proverbs 2:6; 3:5-6)

Importance of SEL in Christian Education:

- **Biblical Foundation:** SEL aligns with the greatest commandments to love God (with all your heart, soul, and mind) and our neighbors as well as biblical teachings about compassion, forgiveness, and empathy. Jesus emphasized loving our neighbors and treating others as we want to be treated (Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 6:31).
- **Character Development:** SEL fosters character traits such as kindness, patience, and self-control—qualities that reflect Christ’s character.
- **Moral Development:** Research by Barna indicates a child’s moral development is formed by age 9 and a Biblical worldview should undergird social emotional learning and responses to trauma or hardship.⁹
- **Healthy Relationships:** SEL equips children to build healthy relationships, resolve conflicts, and show grace to others.¹⁰
- **Emotional Well-Being:** Teaching emotional intelligence helps children manage feelings, anxiety, and stress, thus promoting resilience and overall well-being.

⁴ Cumbest, C. K. (2022). The Impact of Professional Development on Trauma-Informed Practices (TIPs) in a Teacher's Feeling of Self-Efficacy.

⁵ Murano, D., Sawyer, J. E., & Lipnevich, A. A. (2020). A Meta-Analytic Review of Preschool Social and Emotional Learning Interventions. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 227-263. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320914743>

⁶ American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Childcare and Early Education. *Caring for Our Children (CFOC) Standards Online Database*. Aurora, CO; National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Childcare and Early Education; 2020: Standard 1.3.2.2: Qualifications of Lead Teachers and Teachers. Schools serving children with special health care needs associated with developmental delay should employ an individual who has had a minimum of eight hours of training in inclusion of children with special health care needs.

⁷ Norman, B. K. (2022). *The Impact of the Pandemic on Social Emotional Learning*. Bethel University.

⁸ Cooney, F. A. (2021). *Teachers' Perceptions of Social–Emotional Competencies and Social–Emotional Learning Practices* (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University).

⁹ Larson, M. L. (2020). The child in our midst: The shifting trends in ministry with children and families over the past forty years. *Christian Education Journal*, 17(3), 434-448.

¹⁰ McLaughlin, K. (2023). *Creating Trauma-Informed Schools: A Three-Day Professional Workshop for K-12 Educators* (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University).

Professional Development:

- **Holistic Development:** Christian early educators are to promote the faith, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young learners. Strong early education programs know that children learn best when they have opportunities to be supported in discovering strategies that help them develop emotional, social and cognitive skills needed to become lifelong learners.¹¹
- **Cultural competence:** Due to the globalization of early education settings, early educators are to improve their knowledge and skills in working with children and families from diverse cultures and serving students with various special health care needs.
- **Evidence based:** Instructional methods should reflect current research and best practices related to the skills necessary to meet the developmental needs of enrolled students and engage families, which may include culturally and linguistically appropriate practices.
- **Regulations:** States and territories are mandated by the federal government to establish a framework for training, professional development, and postsecondary education for early educators, teachers, and directors serving in licensed and exempt schools in order to foster social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development in children birth through age eight.¹²

Scriptural Integration:

- **Renewing the Mind:** Practitioners should encourage children to renew their minds with God's Word. For instance, Psalm 34:4 says, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." Teaching them to apply Scripture to their emotions should be ingrained in curricula.
- **Prayer:** Teach children to pray about their feelings, seeking God's guidance and comfort. Philippians 4:8
- **Bible Stories:** Share age-appropriate Bible stories that illustrate emotional struggles and how Bible characters handled them. For example, David's psalms express a range of emotions. Psalm 78:1-8
- **Fruit of the Spirit:** Explore Galatians 5:22-23, which lists the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). Christian educators should discuss these virtues in practical terms.

Teaching SEL in Christian early education:

- **Emotion Identification:** Help young learners recognize and label emotions. Use simple language and visual aids.
- **Emotion Regulation:** Teach strategies like deep breathing, counting, or taking a break when upset.
- **Empathy:** Read stories about empathy and discuss how characters felt. Encourage children to consider others' feelings.

¹¹ INSPIRE Accreditation Protocol: Early Education Best Practices Document. (2022) Association of Christian Schools International. [best-practices-in-early-education/cadc80786cd84d72952b13f14ecdce0e.pdf \(acsi.org\)](https://www.acsi.org/best-practices-in-early-education/cadc80786cd84d72952b13f14ecdce0e.pdf)

¹² United States Department of Health and Human Services. The Office of Childcare (OCC) CCDBG Act of 2014 658(c)(2)(G), (I), (T); Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.44 (2016). Retrieved from <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/ccdf-fundamentals/training-and-professional-development-requirements>

- **Conflict Resolution:** Role-play scenarios where children practice resolving conflicts peacefully and practicing the Matthew 18 principle.
- **Social Skills:** Teach sharing, taking turns, forgiving others, and listening actively. (Eph. 4:1-6, 32; 5:1-2)
- **Bible Verses:** Incorporate short Bible verses related to emotions into daily routines.

SEL in Christian early education is about nurturing the whole child—spiritually, emotionally, and socially—while grounding their growth in biblical truth. Christian educators are called to support parents in their efforts to “train up a child” as mandated by Deuteronomy 6. The school cannot succeed without parental involvement. Parental involvement is defined as those “behaviors shown by the parents, both in home and school settings, meant to support the development of their children’s social/emotional skills and facilitate their educational success.”¹³

Practitioners can avoid dangerous diversity, equity, and inclusion paths by recognizing that scripture indicates that individuals were fearfully and wonderfully created in the image of God and that all people are to be valued and viewed through the lens of their life with Christ over any disability, ethnicity, race, or gender. (Acts 17:26; Eph. 4:7-12; Rom. 12:3-9; 1 Cor. 12) Please refer to ACSI’s Biblical Unity, Diversity, and Social Engagement ACSI Core Convictions and Commitments According to Biblical Worldview Truths document for further guidance in navigating these topics.¹⁴ Christian educators should be cautious in selecting curriculum and aware that SEL apart from the gospel is unbiblical.¹⁵ Advocating for certain moral beliefs and behaviors simply for the sake of society’s common good is not sufficient for Christian educators. The understanding of mankind’s innate sinful nature (as well as Imago Dei), the Gospel being the only solution to sinful nature and behaviors, and the increasing submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit are key to character development are all essential to a biblical perspective on SEL. Diversity within the body of Christ reflects God’s creativity and redemption. It glorifies Him and contributes to unity. As students observe interactions that are biblically aligned with scripture’s “one another” statements, our desire is that they will become disciples of Christ for Jesus said, “by this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Phil. 2:1-4, John 13:35)

Additional reading

- Greene, J. P. (2019). The Moral and Religious Roots of Social and Emotional Learning. *American Enterprise Institute*.
- Francis, J. E. (2019). Integrating resilience, reciprocating social relationships, and Christian formation. *Religious Education*, 114(4), 500-512.
- Hatch, J. A. (2019). From theory to curriculum: Developmental theory and its relationship to curriculum and instruction in early childhood education. In *Curriculum in early childhood education* (pp. 51-63). Routledge.
- Jester, C. B. (2019). *Nurturing and Attachment in Arkansas Early Childhood Settings: Qualitative Early Childhood Caregiver Insights* (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University).

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson.

¹³ Roy, M., & Giraldo-García, R. (2018). The Role of Parental Involvement and Social/Emotional Skills in Academic Achievement: Global Perspectives. *School Community Journal*, 28(2), 29-46.

¹⁴ Epp, M., Gilliam, C., Lee, M., Loncar, S. and Nelson, J. (2023). Biblical Unity, Diversity, and Social Engagement ACSI Core Convictions and Commitments According to Biblical Worldview Truths Retrieved from: [biblicalunitypositiondocument.pdf \(acsi.org\)](https://www.acsi.org/biblicalunitypositiondocument.pdf)

¹⁵ Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. Col. 2:8