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Joseph R. Engler

Vincent C. Alfonso

Jenna M. White

Cory D. Roy

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Assessing Social-Emotional Abilities of Preschool-Aged Children Within a Social- Emotional Learning Framework

*Joseph R. Engler, Vincent C. Alfonso, Jenna M. White,
and Cory D. Ray*

Abstract

During the past decade, there has been an increasing amount of research demonstrating a positive relationship between early childhood social-emotional abilities and later life outcomes. As such, practitioners who work with preschool-aged children are called to understand the social-emotional abilities that constitute healthy development. Doing so provides practitioners with a social-emotional framework from which to work so that they may efficiently assess and intervene in these abilities. This manuscript grounds social-emotional abilities within the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) Framework for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). We describe the need for a multi-method, multi-sourced, multi-setting comprehensive social-emotional assessment of preschool-aged children and describe a rating scale that can be used as a part of the assessment process. The manuscript concludes with a discussion regarding the importance of intervening early to prepare preschool-aged children for future academic and life success.

Keywords: *Social-emotional Learning, Preschool Assessment, and Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*

The developmental period associated with preschool-aged children (i.e., ages 3:0 to 5:11 years) is an ideal time for them to develop social-emotional abilities that set the stage for later learning of myriad skills (Blair & Raver, 2015; Hojnoski & Missall, 2020). For example, during this time period preschool-aged children may gain their first life experiences outside of their nuclear family where they are in social settings (e.g., daycare, preschool, etc.) that require them to interact with peers and adults. The hope is that during this time, preschool-aged children learn how to develop healthy social relationships through awareness of self and others, while effectively understanding and managing their emotional responses to situations and circumstances. For most preschool-aged children, the acquisition of social-emotional abilities occurs with minimal disruptions. In contrast, approximately 10-15% of preschool-aged children will likely experience social-emotional difficulties to some degree (Qi & Kaiser, 2003). As such, it seems incumbent upon practitioners who work with preschool-aged children to understand the abilities that are part of healthy social-emotional development of these children as well as know how to assess and intervene in these areas when needed.

This manuscript begins with an overview of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework that can be broken down into the following measurable social-emotional abilities: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Specifically, we define and describe each of these abilities. Then we discuss the increasing support for conducting social-emotional assessments of preschool-aged children. Next, we briefly describe how to conduct a comprehensive assessment of preschool-aged children that addresses the aforementioned abilities. The manuscript concludes with a review of a rating scale that can be used to measure social-emotional abilities of preschool-aged children as part of a comprehensive assessment followed by a discussion of how the data obtained from the assessment can be used for intervention planning.

SEL Framework

In order to assess the social-emotional abilities of preschool-aged children, practitioners must first have a clear understanding of what SEL is and how to measure it. Perhaps the most well-known organization that provides guidance in the assessment of social-emotional abilities is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). As such, CASEL published a guide on an effective social-emotional learning program for preschool and elementary schools (CASEL, 2013). In the guide, CASEL defined SEL as, "The processes through which 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" (CASEL, 2013, p. 4). Specifically, there are abilities within an overall SEL framework of particular importance that can be taught and measured in preschool-aged children. These abilities are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making and they contribute to an individual's overall social-emotional development.

Self-Awareness

The first ability within the SEL framework is self-awareness, or the ability to recognize one's own thoughts and emotions and how these thoughts and emotions influence one's own behavior (CASEL, 2013). Self-awareness is critically important at the preschool ages. There are several key indicators that suggest healthy development of self-awareness in preschool-aged children, which includes establishing personal likes and dis-likes, understanding personal strengths and weaknesses, and completing tasks independently (Ng & Bull, 2018). For example, discussing and connecting personal emotions with specified behaviors is an important step in the development of self-awareness for preschool-aged children. When preschool-aged children recognize and communicate personal emotions, they are correspondingly able to pay introspective attention to their

immediate states (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016). In turn, this introspection aids in their ability to connect emotions with behaviors.

Additionally, Zeidner and colleagues (2003) found that preschool-aged children who begin verbalizing their emotions by three years of age have a better emotional understanding by six years of age. Another indicator of healthy self-awareness by preschool-aged children is comprehending how others think of them, which helps facilitate the experiencing of secondary emotions, such as pride or shame (Rochat, 2003). Preschool-aged children who lack self-awareness may have difficulties understanding how their own behaviors contribute to the peer development process. As such, preschool-aged children who lack self-awareness may experience more challenges creating and maintaining appropriate peer groups within the preschool setting.

Self-Management

The second ability within the SEL framework is self-management, or the ability to control impulses, manage stress, and motivate oneself. Thus, preschool-aged children with good self-management regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors at different locations and across divergent social situations (CASEL, 2013). This includes expressing negative emotions appropriately, as well as setting goals and then working independently to meet those goals (Dettmer et al., 2020). Self-management requires mastery of complicated processes beyond simply recognizing or expressing thoughts and emotions. Good self-management requires the preschool-aged child to organize their emotions in a way that facilitates other processes such as focusing attention, problem solving, and building relationships (Cole et al., 2004). In fact, substantial research illustrates the positive influence emotion regulation has on children's later emotional well-being (e.g., mood and self-esteem), cognitive mastery, school readiness, and academic success (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016).

Two further indicators suggesting the healthy acquisition of self-management in preschool-aged children are the sharing of

positive feelings and the appropriate expression of anger. Further development of these skills includes preschool-aged children understanding the causes of personal anger/frustration, and the awareness of how individual actions impact themselves and others around them (Ng & Bull, 2018). For example, preschool-aged children with poor self-management abilities might react to a situation by tantruming, yelling, kicking, or sulking after negative social interactions with others (Whitcomb, 2018). Negative verbal behaviors from preschool-aged children with poor self-management could result in name calling, bossing others, taunting, criticizing, or threatening others, which ultimately may lead to diminished peer relationships.

Pretend play is a promising opportunity for preschool-aged children to develop self-management. Through pretend play, preschool-aged children can use planning, monitoring, and controlling one's own behavior (e.g., either verbally or non-verbally) to develop self-management that can be used when playing with peers (Slot et al., 2017). At the preschool age range, self-management gradually begins to replace reliance on parental support for regulatory strategies, largely due to increasing social demands (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Thus, developing strong self-management is a critical contributing factor in children's growing levels of independence (Dettmer et al., 2020) and should be prioritized in early childhood settings.

Social Awareness

The third ability within the SEL framework is social awareness, or the ability to understand social and cultural norms (CASEL, 2013) which is accomplished through empathy, awareness of other perspectives, and identification of available supports (i.e., family). Indications that preschool-aged children are developing appropriate social awareness can be seen in those who wait their turn to speak or play (instead of interrupting), add their own ideas to a discussion, and/or recognize the celebrations of other ethnic groups (Ng & Bull, 2018). Appropriate social awareness is very important at the

preschool age range because children lacking social awareness tend to have difficulties processing and interpreting social cues of others, overestimate their own competence, and misattribute the intent of others (Webster-Stratton & Lindsay, 2009), which may result in conduct/behavioral problems later on in development. In contrast, a higher capacity for empathy, increased ability to comfort, and more willingness to compromise in conflict are positively correlated with understanding the connections between what people want or believe and their behavior (Dunn & Cutting, 1999), a skill which aids in the development of healthy relationships later in life.

Relationship Skills

The fourth ability within the SEL framework is relationship skills, or the ability to display socially acceptable behaviors while working with others, which can then lead to the development of healthy relationships with other individuals (CASEL, 2013). Behaviors needed to maintain healthy relationships include initiating and building relationships, taking turns, and sustaining conversations. (Denham et al., 2014). Indications that preschool-aged children are developing healthy relationship skills include displaying appreciation for others, asking for and providing assistance to others, ensuring positive working relationships with others through cooperation and conflict resolution, and thinking interdependently (Alexander & Vermette, 2019; Ng & Bull, 2018).

Collectively, these skills are core characteristics of communication and social-engagement, which, in turn, lead to working successfully with peers in groups and teams. A main difference between relationship skills and the other abilities discussed is that relationship skills require interacting in social situations (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). Therefore, adequate social opportunities are necessary for the development of relationship skills. Provided ample social opportunities, relationship skills develop rapidly throughout the preschool years as peer groups become more structured, children experience acceptance or rejection by peers, and higher-level

relationship processes emerge (Hay et al., 2004). As such, strong development in relationship skills is imperative to young children's successful transition into their school-aged years.

Responsible Decision-Making

The final ability within the SEL framework is responsible decision-making, or the ability to make personal behavioral decisions based on defined ethical standards, social norms, and concerns for the safety of others (CASEL, 2013). Evaluating the realistic consequences of one's actions by determining the impact those actions will have on others is the basis for responsible decision-making. Children as young as three years of age have demonstrated reasoning collaboratively, providing compelling reasons behind their decisions, and adapting their justificatory speech in a cooperative manner when engaging in joint decision making (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Köymen et al., 2014, 2016). To make such decisions, preschool-aged children must recognize their own thoughts and emotions, take social cues from others, and act on the collectivity of that information (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). Indications that preschool-aged children are appropriately developing responsible decision-making include following rules, considering cause and effect when exploring options for solving problems, and apologizing to others when necessary (Ng & Bull, 2018). Humor is also an indication that children are developing appropriate responsible decision-making because the use of humor is a universal method of safely communicating without putting down oneself or others (Alexander & Vermette, 2019).

The five core abilities previously described contribute to the development of SEL competence for preschool-aged children. As such, practitioners who may be conducting comprehensive social and emotional assessments of preschool-aged children should be familiar with the five abilities within CASEL's SEL Framework. In recent years there has been a heightened awareness regarding the need for accurately assessing, and intervening in the lives of preschool-aged children (Alfonso et al., 2020).

Support for Assessing Preschool-Aged Children's Social-Emotional Abilities

Research has continued to demonstrate the many positive outcomes associated with preschool-aged children's increased social and emotional abilities (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012; Duff et al., 2015). Therefore, comprehensively assessing such abilities has been prioritized by federal mandates and national organizations. This is reflected in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; Pub. L. 114–95). Between 1986 and 2004, regulations expanded mandatory assessment practices to apply to preschool-aged children, required that comprehensive assessments take place in children's natural environment, and charged local education agencies with the task of utilizing a variety of preventative measures (e.g., Response to Intervention) to identify students with special needs as early as possible (Nagle et al., 2020). IDEIA Part B focuses on ensuring preschool-aged children receive free and appropriate special education services by assessing a variety of developmental domains including cognitive, communication, social or emotional, behavior, and adaptive areas. Assessing this breadth of domains facilitates the identification of preschool-aged children who may require extra supports to enter kindergarten prepared to succeed.

IDEIA Part C is designed to reduce infants' and toddlers' potential for subsequent developmental delay, reduce overall special education and related service costs, and enhance educational agencies' capacity to evaluate and serve the varying needs of children effectively (Jacob et al., 2016). IDEIA Part C makes early intervention mandatory and incentivizes states to provide comprehensive identification services (e.g., Child Find), appropriate and early diagnostic testing, and family-directed assessments. Implemented together, these legislatively-driven practices and developmental screenings help to identify children at risk for disabilities and provide corresponding early intervention services.

With a growing body of research demonstrating the influence of early development on later outcomes, preschool assessment has become a priority not only in the area of special education, but in general education as well. The ESSA aims to close educational achievement gaps by ensuring all children begin kindergarten ready and equipped to access their education and learn. The focus on academic readiness has driven many early childhood education initiatives and has led to subsequent increases in publicly funded preschool programs. However, addressing academic readiness in early childhood education settings may not be sufficient. For example, kindergarten teachers may perceive appropriate social-emotional development as important as, or perhaps more important than, early academic skill acquisition (Curby et al., 2017). With funding comes the need for accountability measures; therefore, most constituents use some form of preschool assessment to measure preschool-aged children's readiness to begin kindergarten. Knowing the influence of social and emotional competencies on preparedness to enter the K-12 school system, such comprehensive assessments must measure these competencies in preschool-aged children and then use these data to inform early intervention. Legislators continue to develop additional policies centering around early intervention as additional evidence of long-term benefits for children is discovered (Raines et al., 2020).

Beyond federal regulations, a variety of professional organizations have asserted their support for preschool assessment practices. One such organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), provides accreditation programs, advocacy efforts, position statements, conferences, and professional development resources to bolster early childhood educators' support for preschool-aged children and increase their readiness to enter kindergarten. Standard 4 of NAEYC's Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items guide, *Assessment of Child Progress*, emphasizes the importance of utilizing systematic assessment to identify children who require more intensive instruction

or intervention or who may require further developmental evaluation (NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Plan, 2018). In their guide, NAEYC outlines best practices in creating assessment plans, using appropriate assessment methods, identifying children's interests/needs and describing children's progress, adapting curriculum, individualizing teaching, and informing program development. Similar to the aforementioned federal regulations, NAEYC also underscores the importance of communicating with families and involving families in the comprehensive assessment process. Truly comprehensive assessment involves employing a wide range of strategies, individuals, and data-collection methods to describe the most accurate picture of a preschool-aged child.

Conducting a Comprehensive Assessment of Social-Emotional Abilities

A properly conducted comprehensive assessment of social-emotional abilities typically begins with a referral question where a teacher, parent, or other caregiver may have noticed a deficit or concern with their preschool-aged child. The referral question is often given to a practitioner with the credentials and competencies necessary to conduct a comprehensive assessment and evaluation (e.g., school psychologist). For example, a preschool teacher may have noticed that a preschool-aged child has extreme difficulties with self-management and has therefore been isolated amongst their peers warranting a referral for an assessment. The preschool teacher may then refer the preschool-aged child for an assessment to identify the problem and consequently intervene early, if needed, so that difficulties do not persist into the future. Then the practitioner responsible for conducting a social-emotional assessment often seeks to clarify the initial concerns and develop an assessment plan for proceeding (Alfonso et al., 2020).

In order to understand a preschool-aged child's difficulties, it is the authors' recommendation that a comprehensive social-emotional assessment should be multi-method, multi-sourced, and occur across

multiple settings (Alfonso et al., 2020). This is necessary because social-emotional abilities are not an all-or-nothing phenomenon (Dettmer et al., 2020). Rather, they occur across a continuum of ability levels. Social-emotional abilities, or lack thereof, may also occur differently across various situations. To complicate matters further, social-emotional abilities may be a result of what has or has not been taught or modeled by peers and adults. Several of the abilities previously discussed (e.g., relationship skills) require opportunities to practice skills in order to develop appropriately. Therefore, the practitioner conducting the assessment must take the opportunities to learn skills and abilities into consideration when interpreting assessment data. As a result, a comprehensive social-emotional assessment needs to be multimodal to provide the best or most thorough understanding of the preschool-aged child's difficulties.

A social-emotional assessment should use multiple methods for collecting data. Multiple methods include, but are not limited to, systematic direct observations (SDO), interviews, and norm-referenced measures (e.g., tests and rating scales). Each method of assessment has identifiable strengths and limitations (Hojnoski & Missall, 2020). Within a preschool social-emotional assessment, the authors of this manuscript suggest utilizing SDOs, interviews, and ratings scales.

SDOs are a necessary component of a social-emotional assessment in that they provide rich information regarding the contexts in which the referral concern is occurring. Moreover, SDOs provide the practitioner with the opportunity to see the nature of the problem first hand. During the observations, for example, the practitioner may better identify contextual variables that may contribute to the problem. Interviews, while providing different assessment data than SDOs, are also necessary for multiple reasons. First, referrals for preschool-aged children often come from adult caregivers. Thus, conducting an interview with that caregiver provides the opportunity to develop rapport. Second, conducting an interview gives the

practitioner an opportunity to clarify the overall goals of the assessment. In this way, the practitioner can make sure they meet the expectations of the caregiver. Third, gathering information through an interview can provide necessary data regarding how past incidents and/or histories may contribute to the referral question. Rating scales are also recommended for collecting social-emotional assessment data due to their ease of use and comparability to a normative sample (National Research Council, 2008). Because social-emotional problems occur across a continuum, rating scales also provide an assessment of the gradation, or relative frequency, of a problem. That is, a rating scale may capture data regarding a low frequency behavior that may be missed through conducting SDOs. Taken together, these three methods of assessment should provide a great deal of breadth and depth of data to a comprehensive social-emotional assessment.

In addition to multiple methods, multiple sources of information should be used to gather social-emotional assessment data. For example, preschool teachers, parents, daycare providers, and other adult caregivers can provide valuable assessment data. Each of the caregivers adds different perspectives to the comprehensive assessment. From gathering information from multiple sources, the practitioner can look for convergent or divergent data, which assists in determining whether problems are consistently identified across sources. Lastly, a comprehensive social-emotional assessment should occur across multiple settings. Preschool-aged children may display different social-emotional responses dependent on the setting in which they are interacting with peers and adults. For example, a preschool-aged child may display different social-emotional responses inside a preschool classroom as compared to a playground. While these variations may be attributed to the structural differences between each setting, the data obtained can be valuable as part of the assessment nonetheless.

Along with a multimodal comprehensive social-emotional assessment, we recommend that practitioners focus on the strengths

of the preschool-aged child. Moreover, measuring the strengths of a child can provide useful, meaningful data as well (Lappalainen et al., 2009). These data can be used to inform interventions by helping to determine the preschool-aged child's developmental progress and existing skills, while providing a roadmap for future growth (Hojnoski & Missall, 2020). Understanding areas of strength can also help to enhance the motivation and engagement of parents, teachers, and caregivers when working with preschool-aged children (Cress et al., 2015). Furthermore, including strengths in the assessment can provide advantages to the preschool-aged child, such as enhancing the child's sense of empowerment, as well as identifying behavioral/academic traits that are more easily applied when in non-treatment settings (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004).

In sum, a comprehensive social-emotional assessment of preschool-aged children must be multi-method, multi-sourced, and occur across multiple settings to provide a context for understanding the problem(s) for which the child was referred. By using methods such as SDOs, interviews, and rating scales, practitioners conducting comprehensive social-emotional assessments can gather multiple perspectives from multiple contexts to understand social-emotional problems more thoroughly. In addition, social-emotional assessments should be strength-based so that practitioners assessing preschool-aged children can identify strengths in an attempt to overcome difficulties, which is necessary for intervention planning.

We now discuss one of many available rating scales and tools (see Denham, 2006; McCabe & Altamura, 2011 for a further discussion) that can be used as part of a comprehensive social-emotional assessment for preschool-aged children; namely, the Social Skills Improvement System-Social-Emotional Learning Edition (SSIS-SEL; Gresham & Elliott, 2017a). This rating scale was chosen because it specifically targets the five social-emotional abilities discussed in this manuscript consistent with CASEL's SEL Framework, and the assessment data collected can be used for intervention planning for preschool-aged children.

Social Skills Improvement System–Social-Emotional Learning Edition

One response from test developers and publishers to the increasing emphasis on the development of preschool-aged children's social-emotional abilities was the creation of the SSIS-SEL which is a rating scale that can be used to evaluate the social and emotional abilities of preschool-aged children through young adults (i.e., 18 years of age). For the purpose of this manuscript, the authors focus the discussion on the preschool-aged components of the SSIS-SEL (i.e., 3:0 to 5:11). The SSIS-SEL is comprised of the following scales: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decisions Making, SEL Composite, and Core Skills. These scales directly align with CASEL's overall SEL Framework. The SSIS-SEL includes several interrelated components that can be used as a part of a comprehensive evaluation to assess and intervene in the five social-emotional abilities for preschool-aged children described earlier in this manuscript. These components include the SSIS-SEL Screening/Progress Monitoring Scales, Teacher and Parent Rating Forms, and a Classwide Intervention Program that is designed for children 4 to 14 years of age.

When choosing a rating scale to use, it is necessary to evaluate its psychometric properties to determine whether it is suitable or valid for use with preschool-aged children. The psychometric evaluation of preschool instruments is not new. Rather, researchers have spent decades determining evaluative criteria for preschool instruments across various domains (e.g., cognitive, adaptive, social-emotional/behavioral, language, and motor). Readers who are interested in a further discussion of the evaluative criteria for preschool instruments are encouraged to see Alfonso and Flanagan (2009) and Alfonso and colleagues (2020). While a thorough review of the SSIS-SEL's psychometric properties is precluded from this manuscript due to space limitations, a brief overview is provided.

When evaluating the psychometric rigor of a social-emotional rating scale, there are certain characteristics that should be examined.

In particular, the standardization, reliability evidences, and validity evidences are of particular importance when assessing social-emotional abilities (see Table 1.1 in Alfonso et al., 2020). That is, these are the three psychometric characteristics that have been subjected to evaluative criteria by researchers most often. Evaluating the standardization, reliability evidences, and validity evidences can be accomplished through examining information in the *SSIS-SEL Manual* (Gresham & Elliott, 2017b) and comparing it to criteria set forth by Alfonso and Flanagan (2009) and more recently Engler and Alfonso (2020). The standardization sample for the SSIS-SEL consisted of 600 children ages 3 through 5 years. The standardization sample was compared to the U.S. Census Data with regard to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic region. The 3- to 5-year-old sample was representative in regards to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. There was a slight geographic underrepresentation from the Northeast and West on the Teacher Rating Form. As such, those testing preschool-aged children should consider this information to assure that the preschool-aged child they are assessing is adequately represented in the standardization sample.

The authors provided three evidences for reliability of the SSIS-SEL: internal consistency reliability, test-retest reliability, and interrater reliability. The internal consistency was measured using coefficient alpha for the Teacher and Parent Rating Form. For the preschool age range, coefficient alphas ranged from 0.70 to 0.97 on the Teacher Rating Form and .74 to .96 on the Parent Rating Form across gender specific scales. In general, most coefficient alphas were in the .80s with the exception of the Self-Awareness scale which consistently fell in the .70s to low .80s. This suggests that the internal consistency for the SSIS-SEL is generally adequate (Alfonso & Flanagan, 2009; Engler & Alfonso, 2020); however, practitioners should use caution when interpreting the Self-Awareness scale for preschool-aged children. Moreover, those assessing Self-Awareness of preschool-aged children would want to ensure that there are corroborating evidences using multiple methods prior to making high stakes decisions based upon a low score in this area.

The SSIS-SEL *Manual* (Gresham & Elliott, 2017b) provided test-retest reliability data for the Screening/Progress Monitoring Scales as well as the Teacher and Parent Rating Forms. The test authors, however, did not differentiate the test-retest reliability data between age groups. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the adequacy of these data for preschool-aged children. The final evidence of reliability was interrater reliability. Similar to the test-retest reliability data, the test authors did not disaggregate the data based upon age. Thus, no evaluative conclusions can be drawn regarding the adequacy of these data for preschool-aged children.

The SSIS-SEL authors provide validity evidence based on scale content, intercorrelations between rating forms, correlations with other acceptable measures, and evidence based upon a special group study. The authors reported that items were created for the SSIS-SEL based upon a review of the literature and also theoretical and statistical derivations. The test authors also provided evidence for validity based upon intercorrelations between rating forms. While some correlations between forms are low to moderate, the two composite scale scores (SEL Composite Scale and Core Skills Scale) demonstrated the strongest correlations. The SEL Composite Scale and Core Skills Scale are derived from several scales; therefore, it makes sense that these have the highest intercorrelations. The authors also provided correlations between the SSIS-SEL and other behavioral assessments such as the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015) and the Vineland-II (Sparrow et al., 2005, 2006). In general, the correlations between the SSIS-SEL and other similar measures are generally high. Lastly, the authors of the SSIS-SEL provided validity evidence based on a special group study with a population of children with autism spectrum disorder. In general, children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were rated significantly lower than a matched control group. It should be noted that validity evidence is something that must continue to be accumulated through independent reviews and research. Therefore, those considering using the SSIS-SEL should monitor the professional literature as more information becomes available.

The SSIS-SEL is one of many tools that can be used as part of a comprehensive social-emotional assessment for preschool-aged children. It is directly aligned with CASEL's SEL Framework and can provide multiple perspectives (i.e., Teacher and Parent Rating Forms) regarding a preschool-aged child's social-emotional abilities. In addition, the SSIS-SEL also provides a CIP (CIP) that can be used to intervene with preschool-aged children. The CIP is a viable tool that is relatively easy to implement and is grounded in instructional approaches that have been shown to be effective when teaching preschool-aged children.

Intervening with Preschool-Aged Children

At the preschool age range, children are subject to myriad influences. Preschool teachers, daycare providers, and parents may all utilize varying skillsets in their work with preschool-aged children and their influence remains with children well beyond their preschool years. With the increased emphasis on kindergarten readiness, the number of children attending preschool or other early childhood programs is increasing (Conroy et al., 2019), and as a result, more credence is being given to the influence of preschool programs and preschool educators on children's current and future successes. However, certification requirements for preschool teachers are generally less rigorous and formalized than requirements placed on those pursuing a K-12 certification. This contributes to early childhood teachers finding themselves less equipped to intervene effectively with preschool-aged children's social or behavioral challenges (Stormont et al., 2008), resulting in increasing numbers of behavioral problems in their classrooms (Conroy et al., 2019). In fact, preschool teachers cite student discipline as their primary concern (Ingersoll, 2001) and often times resort to more reactive or punitive disciplinary measures (e.g., suspension or expulsion, which are negatively correlated with access to behavior professionals or behavioral consultation) (Gilliam, 2005). Unfortunately, these measures show little positive impact on the long-term development of

preschool-aged children, primarily in the area of self-regulation, and do not set these preschool-aged children up for smooth transitions into their K-12 educational careers.

In contrast, research illustrates a positive correlation between preschool teacher knowledge of behavior management and preschool-aged children's prosocial behavior (LeBel & Chafouleas, 2010), allowing teachers and children the opportunity to spend more time engaging in educational material and less time managing interfering behavior. Taken together, growing class sizes, lack of training in behavior management, and increasing numbers of behavioral problems create an imminent need for preventative and targeted interventions to mitigate the number of challenges preschool-aged children experience upon entering the K-12 school system. When preschool-aged children receive interventions early and in the appropriate area, receive interventions that are based upon data, and are taught skills generalizable to other settings, they enter their educational journey better prepared to learn and experience the greatest success long-term.

Up until several decades ago, interventions were determined based largely upon practitioners' philosophical or clinical beliefs rather than on formative data; however, interventions rooted in subjective beliefs showed little effectiveness and therefore did not appropriately address children's difficulties (Riley-Tillman & Burns, 2009). Presently, ESSA requires interventions to be evidence-based; that is, they must demonstrate a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes based on varying degrees of methodological rigor (Grant et al, 2017). Part of what makes assessment so valuable is that, when conducted comprehensively, it can identify a preschool-aged child's most significant challenges and areas of need for subsequent intervention. Allowing assessment data—rather than subjectivity—to guide intervention decisions ensures that preschool-aged child receives support in the most critical areas unique to them and shows greater likelihood for success when implemented with integrity (Riley-Tillman & Burns, 2009). In addition,

interventions designed and implemented based on data can be formalized, researched and replicated for use with other preschool-aged children, allowing impact on a larger scale. As such, should practitioners wish to fulfil their ethical and legal responsibilities to provide appropriate education to preschool-aged children, it is critical that they utilize comprehensive assessment data to inform and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. CASEL's (2013) *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs: Preschool and Elementary School Edition* provides a more detailed review of various evidence-based programs. A review of preschool programs published after 2013 may be found on CASEL's website, www.casel.org/guide/programs/.

In addition to using data to guide intervention planning, data should be collected and analyzed to evaluate the progress of interventions. While interventions may be adjusted according to the preschool-aged child's needs, progress and circumstances, any intervention put in place should be paired with a corresponding method of measuring outcomes. For preschool-aged children, these measures may include SDOs, daily behavior report cards, rates of behaviors or pre- and post-ratings on a behavior rating form (Hale & Fiorello, 2004). A plan should be set in place for data collection and progress should be monitored frequently given the rapid changes that occur throughout a preschool-aged child's early development. If outcome data reflect a lack of growth, interventions should be intensified or changed accordingly, and should always take into consideration the learning environment in which the child is developing.

Several instructional methods have been shown to be effective in mitigating social or behavioral concerns for preschool-aged children in a class-wide setting. According to the National Association of School Psychologists' Position Statement on Early Childhood Services (2015), specific learning goals promoting interactions, paired with instruction and interventions across various social and emotional domains, provide a focused and intentional learning environment and provide preschool-aged children with ample opportunities to practice new skills and respond in various environments.

Teachers who establish rules and expectations clearly and early, create emotionally warm and safe environments for all students, offer brief and succinct instructions, provide diverse opportunities for students to receive, engage with, and present information, and embed student interests into lessons enjoy decreased behavioral challenges when teaching preschool-aged children (DuPaul & Cleminshaw, 2020). Teacher-directed instruction allowing preschool-aged children the opportunity to play, explore and discover with increasing levels of independence has also been shown to be effective in teaching social and emotional skills to preschool-aged children.

At the individual level, socially appropriate communication and other prosocial skills can be taught and maintained by implementing interventions utilizing direct instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and reinforcement (Steege et al, 2019). Finally, it is important to understand that the behavior management skills displayed by teachers and other influential adults are internalized by preschool-aged children. That is, by observing and internalizing prosocial emotion and behavior regulation, preschool-aged children become more self-regulated themselves (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009). As such, perhaps one of the most effective ways to increase social-emotional abilities in preschool-aged children is for adults to model their own behavior and communication.

While there are many available intervention programs focusing on teaching social-emotional abilities to preschool-aged children (see McCabe & Altamura, 2011), the SSIS-SEL's CIP is one tool which utilizes several of the aforementioned strategies via its Tell, Show, Do, Practice, Monitor, Generalize model of teaching skills consistent with the five SEL abilities (Elliott & Gresham, 2017). Each of these instructional phases (Tell, Show, Do, etc.) provides preschool-aged children with new ways to engage with the material and when implemented together, allow children to apply their new skills with increasing degrees of independence. This format is consistent with the scaffolding approach wherein instructors teach at a level just above what children are able to do independently, allowing them to

reduce supports gradually until children demonstrate abilities completely independently. Further, the SSIS-SEL's CIP graduated format allows the intervention to focus on preschool-aged children's prior knowledge rather than their learning style, which has been shown to maximize engagement in lessons (Willingham, 2009). Skill units may then be tailored to each preschool-aged child's area of need, while assessment data are used to inform subsequent intervention units (e.g., Listening to Others, Saying Please and Thank You, Following Rules, etc.).

Given the variety of influences on preschool-aged children, effective interventions must include collaboration with families, early childhood educators, community resources and physicians. Working collaboratively with these stakeholders increases the likelihood that skills learned throughout interventions will be consistently applied, and eventually generalized across settings. Generalizability, which refers to a child's ability to apply a skill learned in one setting to new, diverse settings, contributes positively to a preschool-aged child's more seamless transition to elementary school and subsequently reduces the amount of behavioral and academic difficulties they may experience later in their educational career and beyond.

Summary

In summary, a well-designed social-emotional assessment for preschool-aged children should be grounded in an SEL framework. One of the most widely recognized frameworks was designed by CASEL (2013). The CASEL Framework provides direction for practitioners conducting comprehensive social-emotional assessments for preschool-aged children regarding the most salient abilities to measure. These abilities are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each of the abilities can be measured using a multi-model approach to assessment that also focuses on the strengths of a preschool-aged child. One particular tool, of many, that can be used as part of a comprehensive social-emotional assessment is the SSIS-SEL.

The SSIS-SEL was described in this manuscript because of its alignment with CASEL's SEL Framework and also because it was designed with an intervention component (i.e., CIP) that is consistent with instructional strategies and opportunities necessary to promote social-emotional development in preschool-aged children.

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