



# Safe, Supported, and Ready to Learn

Thousands of students carrying backpacks stream into school every day. As a society we rely on school staff to ensure that all children receive the education they need to become healthy, productive citizens. The reality is that some children bring more in their backpacks than last night's homework. These children come weighed down by the impact of negative life experiences. Some of them are abused or neglected. Others live with the loss of a parent. Some witness violence at home or in their neighborhood. These and other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs, box 1)<sup>1</sup> can compromise optimal brain development and negatively affect children's physical, emotional, behavioral, social, and cognitive development.<sup>2,3</sup>

When ACEs are sustained over a long period of time, they can result in toxic stress,<sup>2</sup> and, for some children, contribute to **Complex Trauma** that can shake their sense of safety to its core.<sup>4</sup> When children also live with the stress of poverty, or experience bullying or harassment at school, the impact

## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES<sup>1</sup>

### Abuse

- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual

### Neglect

- Emotional
- Physical

### Household Dysfunction

- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

Note: Other categories of ACEs have been studied in subsequent research.

BOX 1



of ACEs can be amplified. But the violence, instability, and neglect experienced by these children need not completely jeopardize their ability to learn in school.<sup>4</sup> Schools can be a sanctuary where all children—including those who need it most—experience safety and support. And when children feel safe and supported, they're ready to learn.<sup>5</sup>

## Putting Safety and Support First

It's well established that as humans we share basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence.<sup>6,7,8</sup> The need for belonging is met when we have close, supportive relationships; the need for autonomy is met when we have some influence and control over what happens to us; the need for competence is met when we feel capable and accomplished. Another basic need is that of physical and emotional safety. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the need for safety is second only to our physiological needs for food, water, and sleep.<sup>9</sup> Students bring these basic psychological needs with them to school. And if these needs are not met, they are less likely to commit to the school's values, norms, and rules.<sup>6</sup> They're also less likely to feel motivated and able to concentrate on learning.<sup>7,10,11</sup>

Meeting these basic psychological needs for students is an essential pre-condition for learning<sup>6,7,8</sup> and requires more than a challenging curriculum, adequate supplies, or clean facilities. It requires an environment of safety and support, which also leads to students feeling more connected to school.<sup>12</sup> **School Connectedness** has been associated with increased academic achievement and other positive outcomes for children and youth.<sup>5,11-13</sup> Students feeling safe, supported, and connected to school contributes to a positive **School Climate**.<sup>14</sup> This in turn supports students' motivation for and engagement in learning as well as staff engagement in teaching. Feeling safe and supported is even more important for students experiencing **Traumatic Stress** (box 2) or other difficulties in their lives.<sup>4</sup> Given that at least one in four students have experienced a traumatic

### TRAUMATIC STRESS

Child traumatic stress occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or traumatic situations, and when this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope with what they have experienced

#### Examples of traumatic events are:

- School shootings
- Gang-related violence in the community
- Terrorist attacks
- Natural disasters (for example, earthquakes, floods, or hurricanes)
- Serious accidents (for example, motorcycle or car crashes)
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- Physical or sexual assault (for example, being beaten, shot, or raped)<sup>43</sup>

BOX 2

event that can potentially affect their ability to learn,<sup>15</sup> the clarion call for schools must be to put safety and support first.

## Feeling Safe

A student's perception of school safety affects his or her ability to learn.<sup>5,10,14,16</sup> In a chapter on SEL in contemporary schools, D. Osher and colleagues rank safety as the first condition for learning, and describe it as being composed of two facets: "Physical safety involves freedom from physical harm and threats of harm; emotional safety refers to freedom from bullying, harassment, and humiliation."<sup>17</sup> When students don't experience safety in school, they're less able to focus in class<sup>10,14</sup> and less likely to take academic risks.<sup>18</sup>

An unsafe school environment can also contribute to increased absenteeism and decreased connectedness and engagement in school and the learning process.<sup>11,16,19</sup>

### Complex Trauma

The problem of children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development<sup>42</sup>

### School Connectedness

The belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals<sup>13</sup>

### School Climate

The conditions or quality of the learning environment created and maintained by the values, beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and physical setting shared by individuals within the school community<sup>14</sup>



On the other hand, when students feel emotionally and physically safe in an environment that features mutual trust and respect, they may feel more able to stretch themselves academically and socially.<sup>18</sup> For students struggling with the effects of abuse, neglect, or other ACEs, the experience of safety is even more essential for academic success. The **Toxic Stress Response** (box 3) they may have developed means that their brain and body are on high alert and more likely to shift into survival mode at the slightest provocation.<sup>3,20-22</sup> In this state, higher order brain functioning is put on hold to devote resources to the flight, fight, or freeze response.<sup>21,22</sup> Feeling safe in school can help quell this persistent state of fear and move students who have experienced trauma toward the calm state necessary for learning.<sup>4</sup>

## Feeling Supported

According to research, school safety is strengthened when students feel supported by adults in the school community.<sup>11,16</sup> Osher and colleagues' second condition for learning, support, can be described as the experience of feeling cared about, well-treated, and accepted.<sup>5</sup> In schools where students experience adult support, the benefits are many, including: improved engagement in school and learning,<sup>13,23</sup> more positive academic attitudes and values,<sup>14</sup> increased academic achievement,<sup>14,18</sup> fewer disciplinary problems,<sup>16</sup> and a greater ability to overcome negative life experiences.<sup>14</sup> In addition, adult support together with high expectations prove a powerful combination for boosting students' academic performance.<sup>14,18</sup>

*A safe and supportive learning environment can help make school a place where children want to come each day.*

There's no question that relationships between adults and students in schools matter greatly. When schools are committed to engendering positive, trusting relationships between staff and students, they are one step closer to providing the support necessary for all students to be successful, especially those affected by adverse

## TOXIC STRESS RESPONSE

A toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.<sup>3</sup>

BOX 3

experiences. Further, the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with caring adults is especially important for children exposed to trauma.<sup>4</sup>

## Finding Sanctuary

Providing a safe and supportive school environment for all students creates a sanctuary in which they can learn and develop to their potential as students.<sup>24,25</sup> Research shows that students who learn in an environment in which they feel safe, supported, respected, and connected are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; be absent from school; engage in disruptive behaviors; experience emotional distress; or initiate sexual relations at an early age.<sup>13,26</sup> Fighting, bullying, and vandalism also decrease in schools where students are more connected.<sup>27,28</sup> For students dealing with ACEs and toxic stress, the sanctuary afforded by a safe and supportive learning environment can be especially beneficial. Research shows that a safe and supportive learning environment can help buffer the effects of ACEs and other negative experiences, making school a place where children want to come each day.<sup>26,29</sup>

Recent school discipline guidelines released in 2014 by the US Department of Education also speak to the importance of a safe and supportive school environment.<sup>30</sup> Citing the overuse of suspensions, expulsions, and zero-tolerance policies as ineffective and harmful discipline practices, the new federal guidelines ask schools to revise their discipline policies and practices to be more conducive to fostering



a safe and supportive environment. They describe safety and supports as complementary forces, both integral components of positive, productive learning environments. The guidelines also promote fair and effective discipline practices that include a focus on prevention and behavior change rather than harsh punishments as a crucial strategy for achieving the overall goal of a safe and supportive learning environment. Research shows that fair, consistent, and supportive discipline practices help promote student connectedness,<sup>12</sup> whereas harsh and punitive practices lower connectedness.<sup>13</sup> This is important for children with behaviors associated with trauma (such as aggression, defiance, reactivity, and withdrawal), which might be misunderstood in an academic setting and when met with harsh consequences possibly result in re-traumatization.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, supportive discipline practices are a key for realizing the promise of a safe and supportive learning environment, a sanctuary where all students are more ready to learn.

## Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment

It's clear that schools must be safe and supportive places in order for all students to benefit most from learning. What's less clear is how to make this happen given current educational conditions. Overloaded with initiatives and lacking sufficient funding, many schools may struggle to add changing the school climate to their already long list of to-dos. It sounds like a big task—and it is—but as with any task there is a starting point and small steps along the way. By focusing on strategies essential for a safe and supportive learning environment—basically preparing the soil—schools will soon find they have ample fertile ground from which a safe and supportive environment can grow. Social-emotional learning is one such strategy and a promising place to start when creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

## Starting with Social-Emotional Learning

**Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** is fast becoming recognized as a key ingredient for school and life success.<sup>31,32</sup> A recent meta-analysis found that students participating in SEL programs showed significant gains in SEL skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as academic achievement.<sup>31</sup> Educators across the nation acknowledge the benefits of SEL in schools and agree that teaching students social-emotional skills is a necessary and valuable component of their education.<sup>33</sup>

Osher and colleagues name SEL as the third condition for learning and contend that, "although distinct from safety, schools in which most students have strong SEL skills are likely to be safer than those where those skills are absent."<sup>34</sup> That schools implementing SEL programs feature greater school safety can be attributed in part to

**97%** of teachers across America say SEL will benefit students from all backgrounds.

Source: The Missing Piece, a report for CASEL

the improved relationships socially-emotionally competent students experience with their peers and teachers. For example, students who participate in SEL programs have more positive attitudes toward themselves and others, show more positive social behaviors in school, and have fewer conduct problems.<sup>31</sup> This results in greater school connectedness,<sup>35</sup> which helps keep students safe and out of trouble.

School connectedness is also enhanced when students feel supported and respected by their teachers in well-managed classrooms;<sup>36</sup> and the task of effective classroom management is easier for teachers with socially and emotionally competent students. The US Department of Education also outlines the promotion of SEL as an action step to help schools build a safe and supportive environment.<sup>37</sup>

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### Social-Emotional Learning

The systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children handle life challenges more effectively and thrive in both their learning and their social environments<sup>31</sup>



Implementing an SEL program for all students is also the universal-level support strategy recommended when creating a trauma-sensitive school.<sup>38</sup> A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a schoolwide basis is at the center of the educational mission.<sup>20</sup> Students who have experienced trauma may struggle with the emotional, behavioral, and attentional regulation required to learn in the classroom.<sup>4</sup>

However, when schools implement SEL programs, the skills students learn, such as perspective-taking, emotion-management, and problem-solving, can help address the skills gaps experienced by children who have been traumatized and improve their ability to benefit from instruction.

## All Students Ready to Learn

All students come to school with basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, competence, and safety. Pre-conditions for learning, these needs are best met through the creation of a safe and supportive environment. Schools can start building an environment of safety and support by implementing a social-emotional learning program that includes content to increase student protection, prevent bullying, and promote safety. Feeling safe and supported at school is especially important for students affected

by trauma and negative life events. Students coping with trauma need school to be a sanctuary, a place where they feel physically and emotionally safe and buoyed by positive relationships with supportive adults. When the most vulnerable students experience school as a safe and supportive learning environment—one in which they feel welcome and respected, engaged and connected, challenged and valued—then it's likely all students will feel safe and supported, too. And when students feel safe and supported, they're ready to learn.

### Contact

Research-based Second Step SEL is a universal, classroom-based curriculum for Preschool through Grade 8 that teaches students the skills they need to be safe, succeed in school, and get along well with others.

Learn about more educators' experiences with Second Step SEL at [SecondStep.org/success](http://SecondStep.org/success) or call Committee for Children at 800-634-4449, ext. 1.

### Who We Are

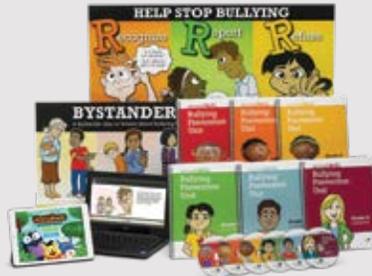
Though we're best known for our innovative SEL-centric programs for schools, Committee for Children is involved in all kinds of initiatives to improve the lives of children. Founded as a nonprofit in 1979 to help victims of child sexual abuse, we continue to advocate for policies and legislation to protect kids and provide equal opportunities for all. From our headquarters in Seattle, Washington, we partner with researchers, publishers, and nonprofits around the world. Our programs reach students in over 70 countries, and we work to make sure all children have a chance to thrive.



## Second Step for Early Learning Through Grade 8



**Social-Emotional Learning**  
Early Learning–Grade 8



**Bullying Prevention Unit**  
Kindergarten–Grade 5



**Child Protection Unit**  
Early Learning–Grade 5

## Creating a Safe and Supportive School with Second Step

*By integrating social-emotional learning with bullying prevention and child protection, we've formed a cohesive foundation for learning.*

Committee for Children's Second Step program is one of the most widely used SEL programs in the United States. The universal, classroom-based program promotes the development of students' social-emotional competence and **Self-Regulation Skills**. Students with these skills are better able to maintain healthy relationships with peers and adults and have more coping strategies to manage stressful situations.<sup>18</sup> When all students in a school are learning and practicing SEL skills, it helps create a climate of social-emotional safety.<sup>39</sup>

The Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit and Child Protection Unit both feature additional research-based prevention and intervention components—including training and resources for school staff, classroom lessons and activities, and materials for families.

The Bullying Prevention Unit used in combination with Second Step SEL can help change a school's ecology

to decrease bullying and create a safer, more respectful learning environment. This is especially important for students dealing with trauma, for whom a calm school environment with no bullying or teasing is recommended.<sup>4</sup> Preventing bullying is also important for these students since being victimized at home or in the community puts them at risk for further victimization.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, implementing the Child Protection Unit alongside Second Step SEL can help schools strengthen the layers of protection, safety, and support all students need to have in place before they can learn. For students experiencing trauma, adults who will intervene when necessary and provide support during the healing process are especially critical. These students can't recover if the trauma is still happening, and when it does stop, healing is bolstered when students feel safe with and supported by the adults on whom they rely.<sup>41</sup> The Child Protection Unit, together with Second Step SEL, also prepares staff to help children dealing with trauma learn to regulate their emotions, a key strategy for diminishing trauma symptoms and helping these children reach their full academic potential.<sup>4</sup>

### Self-Regulation Skills

The ability to monitor and manage feelings, thoughts, and behavior<sup>44,45</sup>



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