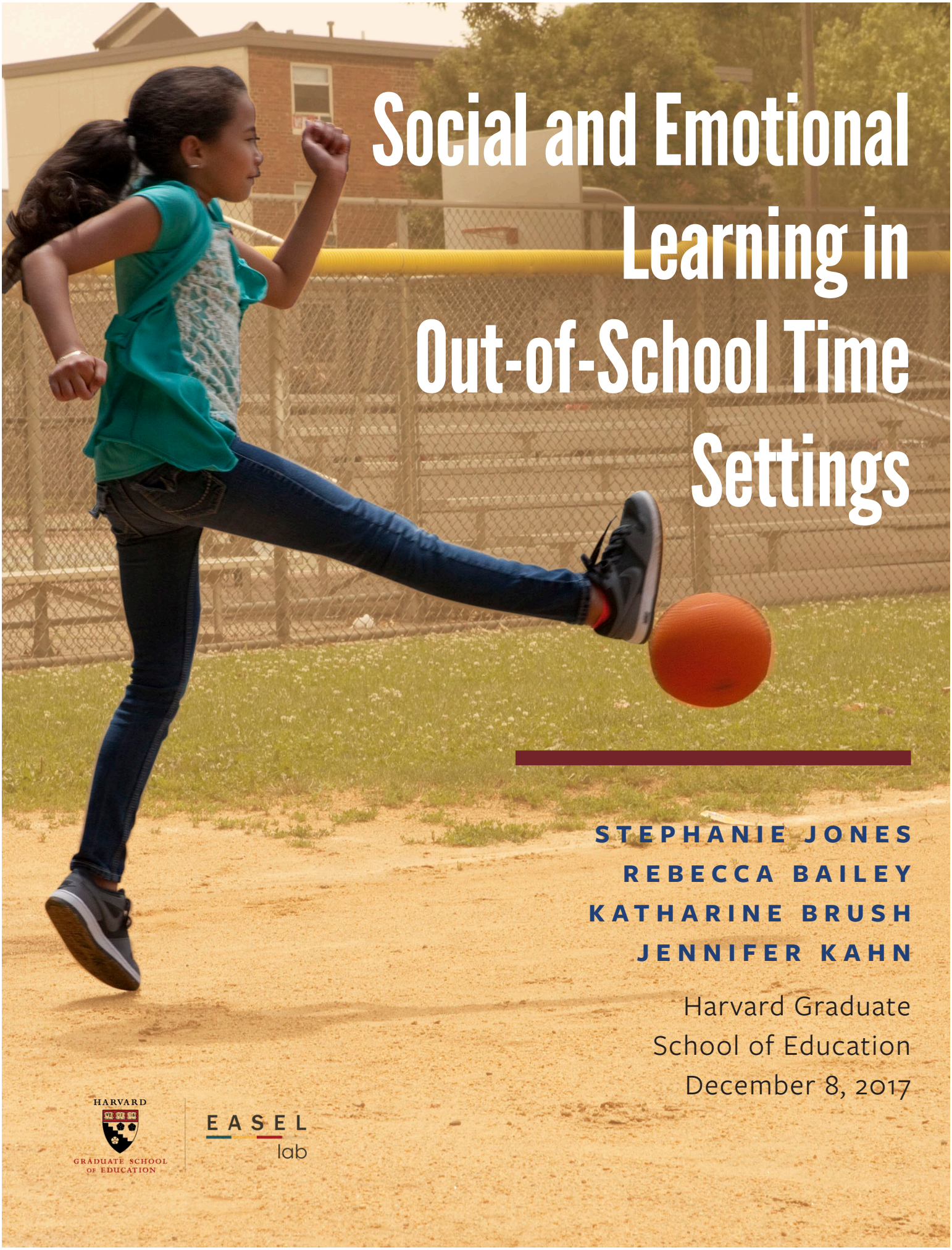

Social and Emotional Learning in Out-of-School Time Settings

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This brief is part of a series commissioned by the Wallace Foundation that draws upon Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out, a resource developed by our team to analyze widely-used SEL programs and provide comprehensive details, transparent information, and cross-program analyses about the various in-school and out-of-school-time programs that are currently available in US contexts.

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons to expect that embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) into out-of-school-time (OST) programming would benefit children and youth. OST settings provide a unique opportunity for promoting SEL as they tend to have greater flexibility in their goals and mission and do not face the curricular demands that can undermine SEL efforts during the school day. OST settings also tend to be less formal and structured, offering increased opportunities to develop the type of close, trusting relationships that enhance SEL.[1] In addition, many of the goals of OST programs are also the goals of SEL programs, and at least one study indicates that OST leaders are more likely to say that SEL is central to their mission than education leaders.[2]

Moreover, research suggests that focusing on SEL in OST settings is beneficial for children and youth across a variety of desirable outcomes. A rigorous review of afterschool programs targeting SEL found that program participants demonstrated positive changes in feelings and attitudes, behavioral adjustment, and academic performance.[3] In addition, evidence suggests that SEL outcomes improve when children and youth have opportunities to practice SEL skills across settings (i.e., school, home, afterschool), and when adult expectations are aligned across these settings. Not surprisingly, research also suggests that OST programs are most successful when they address the needs of the whole child, including social and emotional learning goals.[4,5]

Despite these findings, relatively few evidence-based OST programs have a primary or explicit focus on developing and

APPROACHES TO SEL FOR OST

OST Programs

These programs are designed explicitly to build SEL skills in the afterschool arena. Similar to in-school, lesson-based curricula, OST programs typically offer structured, sequential lessons that provide opportunities for explicit skill building as well as supports for promoting family engagement. OST lessons are not usually differentiated by grade.

Adaption of an SEL Program

Given their wider availability, some organizations choose to adapt existing school-based SEL programs for OST settings. Some SEL programs provide guidance on adaptation for OST, while others do not. When selecting programs, organizations should consider the four principles (see below) underlying high-quality out-of-school time as well as specific contextual needs.

Kernels

Kernels of practice are specific activities or strategies used by effective prevention programs that have been shown to result in specific behavior changes. Kernels provide a flexible, tailored approach that is low-cost and easy to use across settings. While kernels are a new idea in SEL, the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is developing a set of SEL kernels. For more information, see our forthcoming brief on kernels.

fostering specific SEL skills. The box above illustrates some existing approaches to SEL in OST settings, highlighting the opportunity for additional flexibility and growth in this field. Rather than implementing evidence-based programs, OST organizations tend to report focusing more on creating a general climate that supports the development of SEL skills. Yet in order for schools and OST programs to work together to effectively promote SEL, it is important for OST practitioners to understand different approaches to SEL, to be clear about how they are supporting SEL skills, and to be proactive about connecting and coordinating with school partners.[6] The more intentional OST programs are about addressing SEL skills, the easier it will be to align efforts and expectations across settings.

Below, we review the evidence-based OST programs that explicitly target SEL. In addition, we provide a set of guidelines and considerations for adapting SEL programs for OST and for making decisions about SEL programming that best fit the needs and goals of a particular context.

OST PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON SEL

While few SEL programs have been designed specifically for OST, many school-based programs provide guidelines for adaptations or have been used successfully in OST settings. These programs vary in a number of ways: they focus on a variety of skills, employ different teaching strategies, provide varying levels of implementation support, and have different levels of evidence of effectiveness. Stakeholders can use the figures below to identify potential programs for use in their setting.

Based on our content analysis of 25 leading SEL programs[7], Table 1 provides a list of programs that: (a) are designed primarily for use in OST settings; (b) are designed for school-based implementation but also offer separate OST activities or lessons; (c) are designed for use across multiple settings including school, after-school, or other community settings; and (d) are not designed specifically for OST, but have been adapted and/or used successfully in OST settings.

Table 1. Programs for Use in OST

OST Programs	Offer Separate OST Activities/Lessons	Designed for Use Across Settings, Including OST	Not Designed for OST, But Have Been Used Successfully in OST
Before the Bullying A.F.T.E.R. School Program	The Mutt-i-grees Curriculum	Character First	Second Step
Girls on the Run	Too Good for Violence	MindUP	SECURe
WINGS for Kids		Playworks	Lions Quest
		Conscious Discipline	
		Positive Action	
		Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program	

Again, based on our content analysis of 25 leading SEL programs, Table 2 provides a closer look at the three programs designed specifically for OST. This figure illustrates the key features and components of each of these programs, including targeted grade range, program focus, skill focus, and other unique features.

Table 2. Features of Programs Designed Specifically for OST

OST SPECIFIC PROGRAMS					
PROGRAM	**Grade Range**	**Program Focus**	**Predominant Instructional Strategy**	**Predominant Skill Focus**	**Unique Features**
BEFORE THE BULLYING	K-8	Bullying prevention Positive social skills Acceptance Friendship Teamwork Empathy Responsibility	Music Discussion	Interpersonal Skills Emotional Skills Character	School-based and OST versions Self-facilitated Add-on or stand- alone program
GIRLS ON THE RUN	3-8	Healthy relationships Teamwork Self-awareness/care Empowerment	Physical activity Discussion	Mindset Interpersonal Skills Character	Service learning component For girls Stand-alone program Run by outside organization
WINGS	K-5	Self-awareness Self-management Responsible decision-making Social awareness Relationship skills	Games Discussion	Emotional Skills Interpersonal Skills	Community service component Gender-differentiated groups Stand-alone program Run by outside organization

ADAPTING SCHOOL-BASED SEL PROGRAMMING FOR OST

Given that there are relatively few OST programs that explicitly target SEL, programs often look to borrow from or adapt in-school SEL curricula for their settings. The following guidelines and considerations are designed to help OST organizations in making decisions about SEL programming so that it best fits the needs and goals of their particular context.

Four Underlying Principles

When adopting or adapting in-school SEL curricula, it is important to consider what we know to be effective as well as the specific needs of the context. The following **four principles** are common to high quality OST and SEL programming:

1. programs provide a safe and positive environment for children and adults;

2. programs support the development of high quality relationships between children and adults;
3. programs are developmentally appropriate, relevant and engaging for children; and
4. programs provide opportunities for direct skill building.

Research also suggests that OST programs targeting SEL are most effective when they employ evidence-based skills-training practices. Specifically, they are likely to be most effective if they conform to the acronym SAFE, meaning they: include **s**equenced activities to teach skills, actively engage students in learning skills, focus time on SEL skill development, and explicitly target SEL skills.[8]

Building upon these core principles and ideas, leaders may want to consider the components of SEL programs that best match their mission, pedagogical approach, and the specific needs of their population. Leaders may also want to consider whether activities are doable in small blocks of time, are engaging for young people, and are aligned with the central mission and character of their already-existing programs.

Five Key Considerations

In addition to the principles outlined above, based on our extensive work in the field, we also suggest five considerations to grapple with as organizations plan for adapting SEL programming for OST settings.

1. **Expansion is difficult when forcing standardization.** While most SEL programs are packaged as standardized units, programs vary widely in their content, approach, and skill focus. To maximize benefit, we recommend that organizations consider how programmatic components can be differentiated to meet the specific needs of their context and student population.
2. **The benefits of consistency should be balanced with the need for programming to be additive.** Research suggests that consistency across contexts improves outcomes for children and youth; however, simply repeating more of the same often leads to student disengagement. To most effectively integrate SEL programming into OST settings, we recommend that partners consider how to maintain consistency without becoming redundant.
3. **SEL programs should authentically support the mission of the OST organization.** Prior work in the fields of family and community engagement suggests that adaptations are most effective when they are fully integrated into the mission and practices of an organization. For this to occur, we recommend that partners choose ingredients from SEL programs that support their existing mission.
4. **In addition to mission, the pedagogical approach of SEL and OST programs should be both aligned and additive.** SEL programs, like OST programs, vary in their goals and pedagogical approaches. Because consistency across contexts and authentic integration contribute to the success of partnerships, we recommend that programs consider ingredients from SEL programs that match their existing pedagogical approach. Organizations may want to look for SEL programs that can be easily integrated with, but also add to, what an OST program already offers.
5. **Organizations should consider the specific SEL needs and learning styles of their students.** Organizations should consider the needs and learning styles of their students. Collecting data can help to inform choices about the content and activity type that one adopts. Once there is clarity around students' needs, we recommend that programs choose SEL ingredients that best address these targeted outcomes.

We recommend that OST organizations begin by discussing how best to address the common principles and key considerations above. We imagine that these discussions will help guide OST organizations in adopting and/or adapting programmatic elements of the SEL programs that best meet their needs. This process is described in the figure below.

PROGRAM SELECTION

With these principles and considerations in mind, organizations can begin to review and select the program, program components, and/or strategies that best fit the specific needs of their context. The diagram below illustrates a process that may be helpful in making these decisions.

Program Selection Process

Use Data to Guide Decision-Making	Include Key Stakeholders	Identify Needs and Goals	Select a Program Using Selection Tools/ Resources
Identify or collect data that will help you make informed decisions about your specific needs. This may include climate data, disciplinary records, or qualitative data from interviews or focus groups.	Talk to teachers, families, school leaders, and other stakeholders about their vision for SEL and the specific needs they hope to address. Remember that making decisions from the top-down can undermine buy-in and compromise effectiveness.	Drawing from data and stakeholder input, identify and prioritize specific needs and goals for SEL programming. For example, this may include a specific content focus, instructional or structural requirements, or the desire to align content across settings.	Having considered the information collected in prior steps, use the attached 'OST Settings Worksheet' and the full report to solidify your needs and goals, and select an appropriate program or strategy.

For examples of how OST organizations and their partners might use this process to make informed decisions, please see the attached 'OST Settings Worksheet', which includes three hypothetical cases studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

[1] Hurd, N. & Deutsch, N. (2017). SEL-focused after-school programs. *The Future of Children*, *27*(1), 95-115.

[2] American Institutes for Research (2015). Linking schools and afterschool through social and emotional learning. *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field*. Retrieved from http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Linking-Schools-and-Afterschool-Through-SEL-rev.pdf

[3] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. American Journal of Community Psychology, 45, 294-309.

[4] Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, M., 2010

[5] Durlak, J.A. & Weissberg, R.P. (2013). Afterschool programs that follow evidence-based practices to promote social and emotional development are effective. *Big Views Forward: A Compendium on Expanded Learning.* Retrieved from http://www.expandinglearning.org/docs/Durlak&Weissberg_Final.pdf

[6] American Institutes for Research, 2015

[7] For a detailed description of our methodology, including the program selection criteria and coding/data collection system, please see Appendices B and C, respectively of our full report, *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out: Looking Inside and Across 25 Leading SEL Programs*.

[8] Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, M., 2010

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THE FULL REPORT:

Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out

Looking Inside and Across 25 Leading SEL Programs

Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and prepared by researchers at the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out is an in-depth guide to 25 evidence-based programs—aimed at elementary schools and OST providers—offers information about curricular content and programmatic features that practitioners can use to make informed choices about their SEL programs. The first of its kind, the guide allows practitioners to compare curricula and methods across top SEL programs. It also explains how programs can be adapted from schools to out-of-school-time settings, such as afterschool and summer programs.

Building upon existing tools in the field, the guide offers a practical, consumer-oriented resource that provides profiles of each program, including the specific skills targeted and instructional methods used. Some programs, for example, are designed to help students regulate their behavior, while others are aimed at developing certain mindsets or character traits.

About the EASEL Lab

***The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory**, led by Dr. Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the effects of high-quality social-emotional interventions on the development and achievement of children, youth, teachers, parents, and communities. Our projects aim to advance the field of social and emotional learning through research, practice, and policy. The EASEL Lab also affects change through its translational projects, which work to strengthen the links between the growing body of evidence supporting high-quality SEL and the creation and application of education policy and practice more generally.*

About the Wallace Foundation

***The Wallace Foundation's** mission is to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. Our approach to accomplishing our mission emerges from the idea that foundations have a unique but often untapped capacity to develop evidence and experiences that can help advance an entire field. Wallace currently has initiatives in seven areas: afterschool, arts education, building audiences for the arts, social and emotional learning, expanded learning, school leadership and summer learning.*

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