

## **Understanding and Using Evidence-Based Social-Emotional Curricula**

### **Front Porch Series Broadcast Call**

Micki Ostrosky: Hello, everybody. This is Micki Ostrosky from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. I am on the National Center for Quality Teaching and Learning, NCQTL, and we are hosting the Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls. We do these on the fourth Monday of each month, and today I will be your facilitator. These are an opportunity for you to hear from national experts on current research and findings in early childhood education. Today's title is called "Understanding and Using Evidence-Based Social Emotional Curricula," and our speaker is Rebecca Cortes, and I'm going to tell you a little bit about Rebecca before we get started.

So Rebecca received her PhD with an emphasis in prevention science from Penn State. Her research focuses on the roles of parents and teachers in supporting the developmental integration of emotion and cognition in infants and young children, and also looking at how this process then lays the foundation for optimal mental health in early childhood. Rebecca is a co-developer of Preschool PATHS. This is a curriculum that's designed to enhance preschoolers' social and emotional competence through emotion understanding, self-regulation, and executive functioning skills. Currently Dr. Cortes is at the Childcare Quality and Early Learning Center for Research and Professional Development, which is in the College of Education at the University of Washington. Rebecca consults with numerous local and national agencies and organizations, including parenting groups, to evaluate and promote community awareness of early childhood mental health and social emotional learning. Rebecca has strong interests in staying connected to the communities in which we do research, and I could tell from just briefly talking to her before this -- the presentation that she's very passionate about her work. She's been a research scientist at UW for 15 years. So please join me in welcoming Rebecca, and I'll turn it over to you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Cortes: Thank you so much, Micki, for that nice introduction. And I want everyone -- everyone else to feel welcome this morning. And I feel honored to have been invited to present for the Front Porch Series. As Micki mentioned, I am a developer of -- one of the co-developers of one of the curricula I'm going to be talking about today, so I just wanted to put that out there as a little bit of a disclaimer but also as the reason for why I'm so passionate about this topic. I have a lot invested in seeing that preschool settings or early childhood settings do well in their implementation of this kind of curricula.

I'm going to start out with our learning objectives today. And in this first slide, what I like to do when I talk about social emotional learning is start out with a common definition of what this means just to make sure we're all on the same page. Next, I'm going to talk about the process of translating developmental science -- think of that as child development science -- and what our current understanding of that is into evidence-based SEL curricula. And I'll be using the acronym SEL interchangeably with social emotional learning throughout my presentation. I'll provide some examples of how SEL curricula might be modified for individualized support, and finally I'll share some research and lessons from the field that inform high-quality implementation of SEL curricula.

So we're here this morning to learn about implementing, about understanding and using or implementing evidence-based social-emotional curricula. So I thought it was important to also be on the same page about what do we mean by evidence-based? At the website for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration are guidelines that outline the core features of evidence-based programs. And as you look at this slide, notice that I've highlighted in bold two features that are particularly relevant for today's webinar. The first one states that evidence-based programs are based on a theory of change and that they are articulated in a logic model or a conceptual model. This feature is very important because it facilitates translational research or the process of applying basic research to the promotion of human health and well-being. So think of a logic model or a conceptual model as the map that can get us from what we currently understand about social emotional learning, our research understanding, to the implementation of practices that promote social emotional learning. So without a theory of change, we could get lost pretty quickly in translating science into practice.

The second guideline I want to point out is number three, and this says, when studied under research conditions, evidence-based curricula yield results that show a consistent pattern of credible and positive effects. This means that the evidence is reliable, that if a program is implemented with high fidelity, we should get the results we desire. It's very important to note here that the reason evidence-based curricula give us consistent results is because they are based on theories of development. I'm speaking specifically of social emotional learning curricula. So you might recall from a class you took on research methods maybe or any really child development class that a good theory makes reliable predictions.

So now let's look at a common definition of social emotional learning. This definition comes from the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, and their website, which you can see on the bottom of the slide, is [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org). And it's one of the premier SEL websites and organizations for scientists, educators, advocates, and policy makers. CASEL defines social and emotional learning as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to first understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These are the five core competencies of social emotional learning.

And what I'd like to do now is draw your attention to some key words in this definition. First, what does it mean that social emotional learning is a process? So what do we mean by it being a process? To begin with, it is a developmental process, and this means it is expressed differently across the life span. So, for example, understanding and managing emotions looks different in an infant than it does in a 4-year-old, a 10-year-old, or an adult. Another way in which social emotional learning is a process has to do with the word "acquired." Acquired means that these five competencies outlined in this definition can be acquired through the process of teaching and learning. So these skills can be taught and they can be learned, and that's what we've learned from these evidence-based curricula. This is a good time also to point out the importance of being mindful of individual differences and understanding that not only does social emotional learning look different across the life span, it's also learned and expressed differently by individual children, and later on I'll address some issues of individualized support.

Just quickly I'd like to point out that the first competency in the definition of social emotional learning, which is understanding and managing emotions, is foundational to all learning because it involves self-

regulation. So in this slide you see two columns of different skills. On the left side in the orange boxes are what we typically think of as cognitive skills, and on the right side in the green boxes we typically think of these skills as prosocial and learning behaviors. And we see from that middle box, self-management, or affect, you could think of emotion regulation, self-regulation, that it's real-- that it does underlie all of these skills. The numbers that are next to some of the boxes represent -- excuse me. The numbers next to some of the boxes represent the percentage of teachers in a survey conducted in 2001 who thought a particular -- a particular competency was essential for school readiness. So this slide is making the connection between social emotional learning, which includes prosocial behaviors and a very important piece, self-regulation, that middle blue box, and school readiness. So in 2001, this -- I'm guessing this might've changed since 2001, but in 2001, 76% of teachers, kindergarten teachers, thought "engaged in learning tasks" was very important for school readiness.

Seeing how social emotional learning is related to school readiness outcomes, let's look more closely at the process of translating research to practice and high fidelity of implementation. As I mentioned before, an assumption of all developmental research that has been translated into practice is that the research is based in developmental theories or models. In this model, we see four major domains of development: the affective, which is in the orange box; the behavioral, in the green; the cognitive, in sort of a grayish lavender color there; and the dynamic, which refers to two things. First, individuals develop a sense of self in relation to others. And this is a dynamic process within individuals. And second, relationships themselves are dynamic. So although this two-dimensional model looks static, it takes into account the dynamic nature of relationships -- so we can think attachment theory here --and the dynamics of development across time as indicated by the vertical green arrow on the left side. What's helpful about this model, this particular model of development, is how it aligns with the core competencies of social and emotional learning. So the affective part of the model aligns with the ability to understand and manage feelings. Remember that from our common definition of SEL. The behavioral aligns with feeling and showing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships. The cognitive aligns with the SEL competency of ability to apply thinking skills to manage conflict, solve problems, set and achieve goals, and make responsible decisions. And the dynamic aligns with this notion that awareness of self is critical in social emotional learning. So new understandings in developmental science, in particular the relations among these major domains and the role of understanding and managing emotions, which is a kind of self-regulation, underscores the importance of teaching the whole child. So you can see that awareness of self in relation to others can be related to the ability to understand and manage feelings, your own -- one's own feelings, which is related to behavioral competencies, cognitive competencies, and there's this loop then in this dynamic process.

Now we're going to look at what do we mean by translating developmental science into practice? If you remember the first feature of an evidence-based curriculum from an earlier slide, it said evidence-based curricula should have a theory of change, the process of which can be represented with a diagram like the one in this slide. This diagram represents the theory of change model used for a national Head Start study called the Head Start CARES Demonstration Project. The social-emotional curricula tested in this study were -- are shown on the far left side, and those were the Incredible Years, Preschool PATHS, and Tools of the Mind. There's not enough time to discuss this study in detail today, but at the bottom of the screen is a link to the website where you can obtain more information about this important research project. But briefly, the study tested the effects of the three curricula when used in conjunction with a coaching model on various outcomes. And those outcomes, which are

in the colored boxes, are changes in teacher practices, improvements in classroom interactions, growth or increased or improvements in children's social-emotional skills and in children's social-emotional behaviors.

There are two important things to note as far as understanding evidence-based SEL curricula and how to use them. The first is that all the components of an SEL curriculum -- so think about those curricula on the left-hand side. So all of their components, which would be lessons, activities, classroom materials, they should all represent in one form or another the developmental theory that predicts social and emotional competencies. And the reason this is important is because if the programs themselves do not have teachers utilize materials and content that can predict these outcomes, then teachers will be struggling to try to interpret what is the purpose, what is the meaning of this curriculum? So it's easier -- I'll just give you an example of this. So the PATHS curriculum kit contains lessons and materials that address all elements of that ABCD model. So PATHS is based on that ABCD model of development that I showed earlier. So the curriculum itself and the program itself includes a daily compliment routine to promote the development of self-awareness, feeling lessons and feeling face cards to promote the development of emotion understanding, a self-regulation technique - and I think many of you have heard of the Turtle Technique -- to help children manage their emotions, problem-solving lessons, and activities that promote cognitive development and an emphasis on the teacher-child relationship. So everything that comes along with these curricula in the Incredible Years program, Preschool PATHS, or Tools of the Mind, all of the materials themselves help change teacher practices. And we'll get back to this slide before the end of the webinar, because it really holds the key to successful implementation of evidence-based curricula.

But let's look at the results quickly of this Head Start CARES project to see how a theory of change helped with the successful implementation of this project. So this is sort of another way of looking at that diagram, but highlighting the colored boxes. And I first want to draw your attention to what I thought was a key that I had included in this slide, but there are some abbreviations of the preschool curricula that were on the far left side of the diagram in the previous slide. So on this slide that we're looking at, what is the evidence base for social and emotional learning? What is the evidence, what's the research evidence that demonstrates these programs work? So TIY, if you look on the far left in that blue box under classroom management, it says TIY, that stands for The Incredible Years. The Incredible Years, teachers that use the Incredible Years had, were -- had better or improved changes in their practices. Underneath that, where it says SEL, social emotional learning instruction, both the Incredible Years, that TIY, and PATHS were related to better teacher practices in social-emotional instruction. And the bottom of that blue box, you can see the word "scaffolding," and underneath that in parentheses is ToM, and ToM stands for Tools of the Mind. Teachers who used Tools of the Mind in this research study had better changes or improved changes in their scaffolding practices. In the light orange-colored box, we see that only the PATHS curriculum changed teachers' instructional support as assessed by the CLASS, the classroom assessment scoring system. And then below that in the light green box and in the purple box to the right, we see that both the Incredible Years curriculum and the PATHS curriculum improved children's social-emotional skills and behaviors. So this is exactly what we expected. These three curricula -- the Incredible Years, PATHS, and Tools of the Mind -- have been tested in previous randomized controlled trials, so we expected this. But the important thing about this particular research project is that it... it helped us understand that different theoretical approaches to improving children's social emotional learning can be achieved with different approaches.

So now I want to say something about individualized support. Remember that SEL is a developmental process, and because of this, all children can benefit from guided SEL instruction and SEL curricula materials modified for individual children's needs. So in this slide are examples of how some SEL curricula materials have been used for individualized support in promoting core SEL concepts such as emotional knowledge and understanding, friendship, empathy, and problem solving. We all know that visuals are very powerful supports for children who are nonverbal or have low verbal skills. So, for example, in PATHS classrooms, all children get their own set of feeling face cards. You can see those on the left side, those little blue -- the blue and yellow cards. And these cards are used to help children express their feelings. However, in one Head Start classroom, teachers discovered that some children preferred learning about emotional expression from a three-dimensional object, or a feelings cube. So then right below those cards you can see this cube, and it's made out of vinyl, but it's kind of soft. And to expand children's emotional literacy, the teachers taped the feeling face card from the weekly feeling face lesson on the cube so children could hold the cube to look for the appropriate feeling face.

Another example is in a different Head Start classroom, teachers used the PATHS puppets to facilitate learning skills. So, for this example, when one child with low verbal skills did not want to comply with an assessment of receptive vocabulary, the teacher introduced the turtle puppet as a helper that the child could use to point to the appropriate picture in the assessment. So the child was -- seemed not to be at all engaged in this assessment or this activity, but when -- actually I was in this classroom when this happened, and I suggested, "Why don't we see if the child wants to use the turtle puppet to point for him?" And when we gave the child the puppet, the child became much more engaged and the assessment was able to be completed.

And then the last example in this slide is this box at the top, and it's filled with red fabric hearts. And each heart has the name of a child on it. And this was used to help children who were struggling with getting along with peers. This was used in a Swedish classroom, and the teachers thought of a rhyme and then a song, and each child would pick out their heart, and in circle time they would repeat this rhyme or this song, and it was really helpful for the children to be able to hold an object while they were learning about caring, sharing, and empathy.

So now we're going to look into the black box of the diagram that I showed earlier. We call it the black box in science, but that wouldn't have worked for this webinar, so the boxes are yellow. And what I mean by "the black box" is that this is the messy part of research on any intervention, you know, including those with SEL. And so it's not an area of research that has actually been that well studied. But there is a growing field, and we hope to see more research, especially in early childhood.

So what makes SEL curricula implementation successful? This slide lists some lessons learned from over 30 years of implementation of the PATHS curriculum, 15 years of that being with Preschool PATHS. So in our nonprofit, PATHS Education Worldwide, we provide consultation and resources on SEL-based curricula, and this is all based on 30 years of experience in the field. So what have we learned? First of all, as I mentioned, there's very limited research on the effects of implementation quality on early childhood programs. There's a lot of research on the effects of these programs, which is why they're called evidence-based, but not very much research on the actual implementation. So that said, we probably are helping rather than hurting to draw on implementation research in the health professions that is longer-standing. And one of the key, the very first thing that a program would want to do, a program that's considering using an evidence-based program including social-emotional programs, is

buy-in and readiness. We really want to make sure that a program is ready to receive the intervention or the curriculum and that there's buy-in from everyone. When staff are not onboard with all aspects of implementation, it really can feel like an uphill struggle for the center director, even for teachers themselves.

Next is training, which is more than just showing someone how to use the curriculum. It's really about building teamwork. It's about understanding the developmental theory that informs the curriculum so teachers can generalize the curriculum concepts to all areas of learning. It's also about learning in context. So good trainers spend less time talking and more time on giving teachers and other staff opportunities to practice actual delivery of the curriculum content materials during the training.

Teachers also need ongoing support for different challenges or barriers to implementation, and well-trained coaches can provide that support. Sometimes just having that collaborative partnership with a coach allows a teacher to discover what works well and what doesn't simply by sharing information and knowledge about social and emotional learning, how they understand it, and its dynamic process. Social emotional learning is influenced by many, many contextual factors. So having a coach support a teacher who is dealing with many of these contextual factors in the classroom with children, with families is important.

Finally, about implementation. With regard to implementation, the first rule of thumb is to follow the recipe. If the recommended dosage of a curriculum is once a week, deliver the lessons or activities once a week, not once every two weeks or certainly not once a month. If a trainer says, "This curriculum is most effective when you do X," do X. What if you forgot to do X? It's for times like this that having a good coach and excellent technical assistance are priceless.

Another thing we've learned is that SEL curricula are most successful when they are implemented program-wide. This means really all aspects of the program. And why does this matter? When I say "all aspects of the program," not just in the classroom, but in the hallways, in the area where children eat if they're not eating in a classroom, where they play. But why does this matter? Adults are modeling social-emotional competencies all day long, but the question is, are they modeling the best social-emotional competencies they can be? Are they modeling positive affect? Are they modeling meaningful interactions? Do they have regard for student perspectives? Recall that SEL is a developmental process that spans a life course, and that it looks different from one developmental stage to the next. When all adults in a program are modeling social-emotional competencies that adhere to evidence-based practice, children are going to more easily internalize these behaviors as just part of their school culture and daily activities. It's also essential that a program has strong leadership to help sustain social emotional learning efforts. The curricula, the training, and coach support are often expensive, so they aren't materials that you want to waste time and money on.

Consistency refers to the fidelity of implementation. Is the curriculum being delivered consistently, on a regular basis, as part of the daily routine or weekly routine, and in alignment with a recipe for success? And I'll give you a quick story of what I think is a great example of consistency. In a Head Start program where PATHS was being implemented, there's an activity in PATHS I mentioned earlier called - it's a compliment session. There's the PATHS Kid of the Day, or the Star of the Day. Teachers are free to call it whatever they like. But every day one child is randomly selected to be the PATHS child of the day,

and they're selected by the previous PATHS child of the day. In this particular classroom, there was a little boy on the autism spectrum, and every day that it was not his turn, he would jump up from where he was sitting -- this always happens in circle time -- he would jump up and run to the teacher and start hitting her. And the teachers were extremely consistent in keeping the little boy engaged in this activity, this compliment process, in reminding him that he would have a turn, that his name would be picked from this container, and they did this every day, every day for four months. And when I went to visit this classroom, I could see the little boy sitting at circle time. It was PATHS kid of the day time, and I wasn't in the classroom, I was peeking through a window of a door to the classroom, and I hadn't talked to the teachers since they told me about him hitting the teacher during this time of the day, but when his name wasn't picked -- I could see that his name wasn't picked -- he jumped up, and I thought, "Oh, here it goes. He's going to come over and -- run over and start hitting the teacher." But instead he put his head on her lap, and he cried very softly. I could tell -- his little shoulders were kind of moving up and down. But when he turned around and walked away and went back to his place in the circle, he was using the Turtle Technique. He had his arms crossed over his chest and his lip was kind of hanging a little bit, but he -- that was his -- he was coping with this. And he was only able to do this because the teachers were consistently delivering this particular part of the curriculum with high fidelity.

The last bullet on this slide is flexibility, and this refers more to the curriculum than directly to implementation, and I'm going to explain that on the next slides. Teachers today are overwhelmed with curricula, assessments, quality and improvement systems. The teacher in the classroom, for them it just seems there's no end to all of this stuff. So curricula, evidence-based curricula, one of the reasons I think that they work is that they tend to be flexible. And you want to make sure that they are flexible in different ways.

This slide is a crosswalk of alignment across the curriculum, in evidence-based social-emotional curriculum, the content, standards, and assessment. So on the far left -- in the far left column, the WA stands for Washington. So this is the State of Washington's state-funded performance standard, just a couple of them. I'm sure you know that there are many, many, many more, but I just chose these two as an example to use in this crosswalk. Underneath, in the far left column underneath those performance standards are Washington's Early Learning and Development Guidelines. In the middle are the -- is the PATHS curriculum units. And then in the far-right column are dimensions of the CLASS, the Classroom Observation -- or Assessment Scoring System. And in this crosswalk, you can see -- this is something that I created for teachers that I work with -- how the performance standards in early learning and development guidelines, how are they aligned with the curriculum units, and how are those aligned with an assessment that teachers are expected to use? When using an evidence-based social-emotional curricula, I feel it is absolutely vital that teachers understand how the curriculum they're using is aligned with standards and assessment. It makes it much easier for them to feel like they're not having something added to their daily routine, but that what they're doing is promoting what they know is best for children's school readiness and how that's integrated with the standards and assessments.

So in summary, I would just like to point out that the importance of understanding the relationship between whatever curriculum you're using, social-emotional curriculum you're using, is its underlying theory and the best practices of implementation. And the reason it's so important to understand the theory behind the curriculum is because this is what will allow teachers to generalize these concepts to all learning. If you're using an evidence-based social-emotional curriculum, the training will include a

lot of information about this theory behind the program. And so I encourage people to take advantage, if they are getting training in an evidence-based curriculum, to take advantage of that information and ask the trainers to explain exactly how is this training related or these theories related to what I'm actually going to be doing in the classroom? That said, high-quality training is imperative. We want to make sure -- if you're using an evidence-based curriculum, you will get high-quality training. That is what helps make these curricula evidence-based. If you're not using an evidence-based curricula, ask lots of questions before you get the training. Ask for references, ask for descriptions of what the training involves, how many days, how many hours, what portion of the training is devoted to practice, what part is lecture. But just learn as much about the training as you can. Third, I'd like to have you consider how your SEL curriculum is aligned with your foundational curriculum's pedagogy or philosophy and with standards and assessment. So, similar to that crosswalk I showed. But think about a curriculum that uses -- that relies heavily on positive reinforcement and rewards. That is not something that I have found typically goes over well with Head Start programs that use HighScope, so make sure that whatever curriculum you choose is aligned with your program's philosophy. And finally it's important to understand the difference between being flexible and deviating from fidelity of implementation. Flexibility is critical in social-emotional curricula because it really is -- social emotional learning is more like a philosophy of learning. It needs to be integrated into all domains of learning. It needs to be integrated into all daily activities and routines. Not in a heavy, intense way, but in a very thoughtful and meaningful way. So the more flexible a curriculum is, the easier it is to integrate into daily routines. But it's important to understand the difference between flexibility and deviating from fidelity so that you get the success that evidence-based programs promise. Thank you very much.

Micki: A couple things, in addition to thanking Rebecca very much for sharing this information with this group -- we really appreciate it. I also want to remind our readers, or our listeners that the webinar will be archived. If you go to the Front Porch Series on NCQTL website, you will, in about a month to six weeks, we'll have the webinar archives up there. And also if there are other questions that -- there were a couple other questions that we didn't get to or if you send in other questions in the chat, Rebecca can answer those. And then just a reminder that March 23, same time, same channel, will be our next Front Porch Series. So we look forward to you all going into the NCQTL website and looking for highlights of who will be our next speaker. So have a great day, everybody, and thank you so much, Rebecca, for joining the group.

Rebecca: You're welcome. Thank you, too.

[End video]